

**BUILDING BRIDGES:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH  
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) TOWARDS FAMILY/SCHOOL  
PARTNERSHIPS**

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This qualitative case study examines the perceptions of parents of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) towards family/school partnerships. Interviews were conducted with parents of children with autism that belonged to a parent support group in western Pennsylvania. The resulting interviews cast light on the motivators and barriers that influence parental decisions to enter into partnerships with educational professionals. The parents were motivated towards family/school partnerships through the concepts of invitation to involvement, trust, emotional connect, and parental efficacy. Role construction, team approach, parent's knowledge, and "it's the law" served as lesser motivators. The motivators toward family/school partnerships also have the ability to serve as barriers against family/school partnerships. Whether a concept serves to motivator or stand as a barrier depends on how the interactions occur between families and educational professionals.

Furthermore, analysis centers on the rights and responsibilities of parents found under family/school partnerships and special education law. As parents of children receiving services due to a recognized disability, the parents have additional rights and responsibilities in the area of school collaboration. The law mandates that parents be included fully in the six major principles contained within the law: due process safeguards, shared decision-making, zero reject, nondiscriminatory identification and evaluation, free appropriate public education, and least

restrictive environment (IDEIA, 2004). Since 2004 the law incorporates a sense of responsibility for parents to do all that they can to engage actively in participatory behaviors. As a result of this study, the complexity of participatory behaviors of parents of children with ASD towards family/school collaboration emerges. Bronfenbrenner's (1992) bio-ecological theory of human development and Epstein's (2001d) overlapping spheres of influences serve as the conceptual framework for the study. The environment works on the person as the person works on the environment creating the constancy and change that occurs over the course of a lifetime.

This understanding serves to shed light on motivating behaviors that can be adopted by educational professionals to ensure parents of children with ASD develop positive perceptions towards family/school partnerships.

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Perhaps no period in our history has called for stronger family/school partnerships than our present period. Empirical evidence links positive, productive family/school partnerships with proficient cognitive development and academic success (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Christenson, 2004; Coots, 1998; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1992, 2001d; Epstein & Connors, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001). Furthermore, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (PCESE, 2002) confirms family/school partnerships as a key to success for students with disabilities. The commissioners and expert witnesses stress the importance of parents in the education of children with special needs (PCESE, 2002). Parental empowerment is identified within the report as essential to excellence in special education. Moreover, the commissioners express their concern for children with severe disabilities, such as children with autism and emotional disturbance due to their increasing relegation to segregated educational settings. If parents are indeed instrumental in the educational lives of their children with disabilities then it is of paramount importance to understand their perception of family/school partnerships. What's more, if children with severe disabilities, such as autism, are at greater risk of failing in light of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) then the perceptions of their parents are of particular interest.

The PCESE (2002) underscores the need for NCLB to inform the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) if President George W. Bush's goal of

leaving no child behind is truly to be reached. According to the Commissioners “parents need access to meaningful information about their children, measures of adequate yearly progress and how assessment serves as a diagnostic tool that measures not only a child’s strengths and weaknesses, but also their yearly progress” in order for parents to make informed decisions (PCESE, 2002, p 38). This decision-making process in special education is the foundation for parents’ involvement as affirmed in IDEIA (2004). Further compounding the decision-making stress for parents is the recommendation by IDEIA (2004) to establish higher standards of productivity for students with disabilities. This recommendation is based on the findings that students with disabilities drop out at twice the rate of their peers and are 50% less likely to go on to higher education (PCESE, 2002). However, due to these recommendations parents will have to lend even greater support in order for their children to reach the proficiency levels mandated by NCLB. This call for more active parent participation in special education increases our need to learn how parents of children with disabilities partner with their children’s schools. Hence, it is of great importance to understand the perceptions of parents of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) towards family/school partnerships.

Moreover, I come to this research not only as an educator, but also as a parent of a child with special needs. My child’s special needs were evident from the first moments of his life. By age three he was diagnosed with autism. I realized that in order for him to reach his full potential the context in which he learned and developed was going to be of great importance. I knew that our family and the relationships found within would need to be such as to enhance his social, emotional, and cognitive development. I quickly understood that I would need to be intimately involved in all of the systems that would come to mean so much in my child’s development. The school system where I lived made this very easy by reaching out to all parents of children



classified under special education. My perception of family/school partnerships was one of inclusiveness due to the behavior of the educational professionals in this school system. Perceived life contexts in the form of professional advancement for my husband brought us to a new state and a new school district. I no longer felt included within the educational system. I questioned what was different, why I no longer felt connected and what the ultimate effect would be on the education of my son. I wondered what psychological factors had drawn me into a strong family/school partnership in the first school system and what psychological factors were standing as a barrier in the second school system. I wondered how other families were handling the need for active participation in their children's education in light of a classification in special education. My need to understand, to know, was a motivator for my journey to study the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships.

## **1.1 STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

The intent of this qualitative study was to bring clarity to our understanding of the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) suggest that parents enter into school partnerships based on the psychological factors of *role construction, parental efficacy, invitation to involvement, and life contexts*. This study attempted to determine if these psychological factors also play a vital role for parents dealing with the special education process. The hallmarks of the special education process are the identification for services, the placement decision, the Individual Education Program (IEP), and the assessment of student progress. Parents of students classified in special education are mandated to engage in each of these hallmarks. As such, it is incumbent to know if parents of

classified students need to believe in the following: a fundamental right to play a role in their children's educational life (i.e., *role construction*), in their ability to make a difference (i.e., *parental efficacy*), and that educational professionals truly want them to be active participants in the process (i.e., *invitation for involvement*), in order for parents to engage in productive family/school partnerships. Furthermore, it is imperative to investigate parents' need to have educational professionals understand the family's life contexts (i.e., *self-perceived time, energy, skills, and knowledge*) and the possible impact on involvement. Ultimately, it is of paramount importance to determine if these psychological factors stand as a means to enhance family/school partnerships for the betterment of special education services for a child or if they act as a barrier, keeping parents removed from the process.

Family/school partnerships are recognized as key to student success (Desimone, 1999; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein & Connors, 1995; Feuerstein, 2000). Empirical evidence articulates the connection between student cognitive development and academic achievement with parental involvement (Christenson, 2004; Coots, 1998; Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002). Students become central within all systems that impact their educational lives when family/school partnerships are made a priority. By utilizing a student-focused philosophy, the framework is developed for educators and families to cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate for student success (Christenson, 2004). The academic, social, and behavioral domains are reinforced through shared responsibility, and student success is heightened by cooperation. Students receive enhanced learning opportunities and monitoring of educational progress when families and schools come together (Christenson, 2004; Coots, 1998). An emphasis on the quality of interactions and ongoing connections creates relationships which promote the social and academic development of students (Christenson, 2004). This focus on preventative and

solutions-oriented conditions through family/school partnerships facilitates student learning and engagement. Furthermore, federal policy reinforces the importance of positive family/school partnerships in special education through the legal mandates found in IDEIA (2004). However, family/school partnerships in special education often fall far short of recommended practice, in particular for families of children with ASD (Fish, 2006).

Family/school partnerships in special education remain problematic (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). Often the working partnership leads to stress for parents and education professionals. Parents of children with ASD describe on-going difficulties in communicating effectively with the school and teachers of their children (Coots, 1998; Fish, 2006; Lo, 2008; Summers et al., 2005). Soodak and Erwin (2000) found parents feel invited into the education process based on the circumstances surrounding IEP meetings. Unfortunately, Soodak and Erwin (2000) had more parents reporting meetings that caused them to feel disenfranchised rather than as holding an instrumental role in the IEP process. Furthermore, Fish (2006, 2008) reported the IEP process becomes meaningless for parents of students with ASD when the program is developed prior to the meeting and delivered as a finished product. He found parents perceived that they were being encouraged to sign without voicing their concerns or opinions, leaving them little input into the process. This lack of understanding of parents' perceptions, on the part of educational professionals, may deter the forming of productive family/school partnerships (Fish, 2006, 2008). In order to form productive family/school partnerships with parents of students classified with ASD, our current lack of understanding of the perceptions of these parents must be addressed. Therefore, a research study based on the perceptions of parents of students classified with ASD towards family/school partnerships is of primary importance.

### **1.1.1 Purpose of the Research Study**

Although studies have investigated the foundation of family/school partnerships, few studies have addressed the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships. The purpose of the following research study is to answer the subsequent research questions:

- How do parents of students classified with ASD perceive family/school partnerships?
- In what ways do parents of students classified with ASD describe the motivators for their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?
- What barriers do parents of students classified with ASD encounter in their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?
- How do parents of students classified with ASD describe the relationships that arise out of their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?
- What roles do parents believe they have in the educational lives of their children classified with ASD?

The resulting understanding gained from these descriptions translated into effective policy and practice for family/school partnerships. Family/school partnerships would then reflect the psychological factors that enhance family participation. In addition, insight was gained into what motivators encouraged parents to engage fully in participation.

### **1.1.2 Conceptual Framework**

Often, parents feel education professionals fail to understand the significance of parent participation (Fish, 2006, 2008). Bronfenbrenner's (1992, 2005) bio-ecological theory of human

development brings clarity to the important role of parents in the education of their children. His work highlights the complexity of the interactions between home and school. Furthermore, Epstein's (2001d; Epstein & Connors, 1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence integrates the strains of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory of human development as it relates to family/school partnerships. Bio-ecological theory of human development and the theory of overlapping spheres of influence culminate in the motivators and barriers of family/school partnerships found in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) psychological factors of *role construction*, *parental efficacy*, *invitation to involvement*, and *life contexts*.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggest the specific variables of *role construction*, *parental efficacy*, and *invitation to involvement* are best understood within the broader context of the social ecology of parents' lives. They too emphasize Bronfenbrenner's (1992, 2005; Hossain & Anziano, 2008) belief of human development being best understood within the proximal and distal social systems that act on developmental processes and outcomes. According to Bronfenbrenner (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000), school and home are two of the most important *microsystems* in a child's life, directly interacting with children. The connections between the various elements of the *microsystem* exist within the *mesosystem*. These connections include how parents and teachers work together to support the educational development of students. The *exosystem* is defined as a larger system that, while not directly interacting with a child, has great impact on the student's development (Lin & Bates, 2010). Within the *exosystem* we find parents' occupations and the nuances of parents' lives, which have a direct impact on the family. A parent's work schedule may conflict with direct involvement in a student's school day. The rigidity of the parent's employment may not allow the parent the ability to attend school

meetings or be present to support homework endeavors. Encapsulating these relationships is the *macrosystem*, which includes the belief systems of a culture, cultural values, and laws.

The *macrosystem* defines the intricacies that arise in the interactions of the many people in the life of a student. By extension we realize the need not only to consider the child but the dynamic relationships that exist between the child and his parents, the parents and their greater environment, and the characteristics of the family (Lin & Bates, 2010). The multiple elements of a child's environment come together to form the student that arrives in the classroom each day. The educational professional who understands the complexity of human development and the dynamic environments in which students develop will be able to provide strategies, which enhance student learning through family involvement. In this approach educational professionals are able to optimize two of the most important microsystems in a child's life, the home and the school. Educational professionals are able to create supportive environments where parents of students classified with ASD may become full partners in the educational lives of their children.

## **1.2 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

The following words and concepts are used throughout this research study. In order to understand the relevance of the research questions to the collected data, operational definitions of these terms are necessary. While much research has been done on the concept of family/school partnerships the variety of the definitions that exist keeps researchers from being able to compare the results. This research study will analyze family/school partnerships from the perspective of meaningful relations and the mandates of IDEIA (2004). Furthermore, the research study will

analyze the perceptions of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in light of *role construction, parental efficacy, invitations to involvement, and perceived life contexts*.

### **1.2.1 Defining Family/School Partnership**

Many terms have been used to refer to the behaviors, which arise between parents and educational professionals. In defining family/school partnerships, researchers have analyzed the concepts of parental participation, parental involvement, school-family relations, as well as others (Driessen, Smit, & Slegers, 2005). For the purpose of this study family/school partnership is defined as meaningful relations between parents and schools. The relations are cooperative in nature with each partner doing all that they can to support constructive interactions. Moreover, each partner mutually supports the other in order to promote the learning, motivation, and development of the concerned student (Epstein, 1992, 2001b, 2001d). Furthermore, the definition of family/school partnership for this research study reflects the mandates of special education as found in IDEIA (2004).

IDEIA (2004) requires parents to be fully included within the special education process. As such, parental rights to participate are reemphasized in the reauthorization of IDEIA (2004) as seen in sections 601, 614, 615, 671, 672, and 673 (P.L.108-446, 20 U.S.C.). In Sections 601, 614, and 615, parents are ensured of their rights to be included in all stages of the special education process. IDEIA (2004, Sec. 614) confirms parental participation in the areas of identification for services, the development of an individualized education program (IEP), which contains the student's placement and program, and assessment of student progress. Section 615 concerns procedural safeguards, which also serve as a part of the foundation for parent/school partnerships. Parents must be presented procedural safeguards and the school district must

assure that parents understand their rights as well as the rights of their children. Also, as part of procedural safeguards, parents have the right to a due process hearing whenever a disagreement arises between the school and the parents on the concerns of identification, evaluation, program, or placement. To further support family/school partnerships, IDEIA (2004) provides mechanisms to ensure parents access to the knowledge needed for full participation.

IDEIA (2004) Subpart 3 contains three sections instrumental in the forming of strong parent/school partnerships: Section 671 pertains to parent training and information centers, Section 672 community parent resource centers, and Section 673 technical assistance for parent training and information centers. Sections 671, 672, and 673 are paramount to ensuring parents the knowledge necessary to engage actively in the education of their children with disabilities. IDEIA (2004) re-emphasizes the state and federal responsibility to fund the necessary dissemination of information to parents of children with disabilities. Only through knowledge of the disability and its impact on learning can parents be full partners in the IEP process. In addition, the systems created in sections 671, 672, and 673 allow parents to be instrumental in their own growth in understanding. The features found within these sections of the title demonstrate a high level of respect for parents. This degree of respect reinforces parents' sense of *role construction* and *efficacy* in the lives of their children with disabilities. Parents are able to come to the IEP process believing they have a role to play and the ability to make a difference in the developmental and functional lives of their children.



### **1.2.2 Defining Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, P.L. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. Secs. 1400 et seq. (IDEIA) As IDEIA Pertains to Family/School Partnerships**

Congress enacted IDEIA in 1975 as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1400 (d)). The original purpose of the law was to assure the rights of all children with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE), to protect the rights of the students and their parents to that education, to assist state and local agencies to provide the education, and to assess and assure the effectiveness of the programming (Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007). Major criticisms prior to 2004 lead to the reauthorization of the law in 2004 with changes made to answer the growing concerns. These concerns are addressed in the four parts, Part A, B, C, and D, into which IDEIA (2004) is divided. Part A contains the findings and purposes of the law. Congress reiterated the original findings that students with disabilities will have equal opportunity to benefit from their education and have the fullest, most independent adult life as possible through the enactment of the law (Turnbull et al., 2007). However, due to the rising concerns, Congress investigated and determined two factors were impeding the full implementation of IDEIA (2004). Congress found educators had low expectations of their students classified under special education and educators were failing to implement proven research-based methods of teaching and learning.

In order to rectify these two factors, Congress embedded several solutions into IDEIA (2004). This research study concerns one of those solutions, the “strengthening of the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home” (20 U.S.C. 1400(c)(5)(B)). The principle of parent participation found in IDEIA (2004) promotes partnerships between parents and educational professionals (Turnbull et al., 2007). The principle

is based on the concept of check and balance allowing parents to monitor the implementation of their children's special education program by the local education agency (LEA). In addition, IDEIA provides the means in which parents and schools may collaborate as partners in the best interest of the students. The reauthorization of IDEIA (2004) moreover provided means in which the right to participate is aligned with accountability for the decisions reached by the key stakeholders in the education of a classified student. Parents now have a responsibility to the education of their children, as well as towards the educational professionals charged with providing the education.

This responsibility confers on parents the mandate of acquiring the necessary knowledge and information to participate actively in the education of their classified children. In order to be fully involved parents must be aware of the provisions of IDEIA (2004) or “risk losing the many benefits and rights that IDEIA confers” (Turnbull et al., 2007, p. 291). This knowledge supports parents entering into a full partnership as valuable decision-makers and trustworthy partners. Furthermore, IDEIA (2004) defines family/school partnerships as built on the seven principles of “communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, equality, advocacy, and trust” (Turnbull et al., 2007). IDEIA (2004) has incorporated the means in which the seven principles of partnership is supported and validated for parents and professionals alike.

Communication is supported in the law by requiring parents to articulate what they want for their children within the IEP process clearly (IDEIA, 2004). Parents are also encouraged to share what services they believe their children are entitled to receive. Professional competency has been addressed in the law through the concept of services being provided by ‘highly-qualified’ professionals. School districts must hire only those professionals deemed by the state to be ‘highly-qualified’ to provide services for students classified in special education. This

mandate ensures parents their children are receiving competent services by qualified and trustworthy individuals. Respect between parents and educational professionals is supported through requiring the stakeholders to behave in appropriate manners. Educational professionals are expected to be sensitive to the cultural diversity, personal beliefs, and choices of families. Furthermore, IDEIA (2004) mandates nondiscriminatory evaluations, as well as individualized and appropriate education, to ensure cultural sensitivity and respect (Turnbull et al., 2007).

Commitment on the part of educational professionals cannot be mandated, but is encouraged and facilitated in IDEIA (2004). Educational professionals are encouraged to view their positions as a profession worthy of dedication rather than simply work. The alignment of IDEIA (2004) with NCLB and the concept of ‘highly-qualified’ are intended to facilitate this sense of education transcending into a calling (Turnbull et al., 2007). Equality is facilitated in IDEIA (2004) by ensuring parents are equal participants in the identification, evaluation, program, and placement of their children in special education. Parents and educational professionals have many opportunities under IDEIA (2004) to advocate for children. IEP meetings, mediation meetings, and mandatory dispute resolution meetings all serve as places in which parents and professionals can advocate for the needs of students. Trust serves as the keystone that holds together the other principles of partnership (Turnbull et al., 2007). Trust allows all stakeholders entering into the partnership to believe in each other’s rights to participate. IDEIA (2004) cannot mandate trust, but it can and does provide the procedures in which trust can grow and develop between all stakeholders. By clearly delimitating the procedures for providing appropriate educational services for children classified under special education, stakeholders know their expected roles and responsibilities. When stakeholders behave in a manner conducive to their expected roles and responsibilities an atmosphere of trust

arises. Family/school partnerships then reflect the meaningful relations that are supported under IDEIA (2004).

### **1.2.3 Defining Parents As Found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, P.L. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. Secs. 1400 et seq. (IDEIA)**

Parents are defined in IDEIA (20 U.S.C. Sec. 1401 (23)) as:

(23) Parent. —The term ‘parent’ means—

(A) a natural, adoptive or foster parent of a child (unless a foster parent is prohibited by State law from serving as a parent);

(B) a guardian (but not the State if the child is a ward of the State);

(C) an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare; or

(D) except as used in sections 615 (b) (2) and 639 (a) (5), an individual assigned under either of those sections to be a surrogate parent.

615 (b) (2) Procedures to protect the rights of the child whenever the parents of the child are not known, the agency cannot, after reasonable efforts, locate the parents, or the child is a ward of the State, including the assignment of an individual to act as a surrogate for the parents, which surrogate shall not be an employee of the State educational agency, the local educational agency, or any other agency that is involved in the education or care of the child.

639 (a) (5) Procedures to protect the rights of the infant or toddler whenever the parents of the infant or toddler are not known or cannot be found or the infant or

toddler is a ward of the State, including the assignment of an individual (who shall not be an employee of the State lead agency, or other State agency, and who shall not be any person, or any employee of a person, providing early intervention services to the infant or toddler or any family member of the infant or toddler) to act as a surrogate for the parents.

#### **1.2.4 Defining Autism Spectrum Disorder As Found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, P.L. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. Secs. 1400 et seq. (IDEIA)**

IDEIA (2004) utilizes the term Autism for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The term Autism is defined (Sec. 300.8(c)) as:

(1)(i) Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences.

(1)(ii) Autism does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disturbance, as defined in paragraph (c)(4) of this section.

(1)(iii) A child who manifests the characteristics of autism after age three could be identified as having autism if the criteria in paragraph (c)(1)(i) of this section are satisfied.

### **1.2.5 Defining Role Construction**

Parental *role construction* is defined by Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel et al., (2005) as “parents’ beliefs about what they are supposed to do in relation to their children’s education and the patterns of parental behavior that follow those beliefs” (p. 107). Families base their behaviors on their beliefs on how children develop and what they can do to support optimum development for their child (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Further, families look towards what they can do to support their children in school based on their belief of their proper role within the domain of their children’s education.

### **1.2.6 Defining Parental Efficacy**

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) define *parental efficacy* as the:

Belief in one’s capacity to act in ways that will produce desired outcomes. Self-efficacy beliefs are a significant factor in personal decisions about one’s goals, the effort one puts into those goals, one’s persistence in the face of obstacles, and the accomplishment of those goals (p. 45).

Parental efficacy suggests that parents analyze their own ability to make a difference if they engage in the act of helping their children (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). If parents believe they are capable of making a difference they then create goals in line with that belief. If, however, they believe that they are not capable of reaching the desired outcome they will be less likely to create goals for involvement. Parents high in efficacy tend to become more involved than those

low in efficacy. In addition, parents high in efficacy are more likely to persist in times of struggle for their children. Believing in the ability to reach success supports parents' involvement through the bad times as well as the good. Conversely, parents will more likely distance themselves from the school if they believe they have nothing to offer their children in that domain.

### **1.2.7 Defining Invitations to Involvement**

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler (2005) describe invitation to involvement from the school as, “general school *invitations* include broad school attributes or activities that convey to all parents that involvement is welcome and that it is a valuable resource for supporting student learning and success” (p. 46). The school climate must be welcoming and positive to help parents to be secure in their involvement. A school structure that clearly welcomes parents in by keeping them informed of student learning and processes enhances the parent-school relationship. Teachers communicate their respect for parents and their involvement by disseminating ideas for home-based support for learning. This also reinforces the parents' belief that they are an important key in their child's learning success. Parents who feel uncertain about involvement, those who have a low degree of *self-efficacy* and *role construction*, benefit greatly from *invitation to involvement*.

### **1.2.8 Defining Perceived Life Contexts**

Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) define perceived life contexts as parents' perception of their time and energy, as well as parents' perception of their skills and

knowledge. These *life contexts* exist within other elements of families' and students' lives as captured in bio-ecological theory, e.g. socioeconomic status and cultural group. While families' socioeconomic status and culture influences the psychological underpinnings for involvement, it is families' perceptions of their *life contexts* that ultimately shape their decisions for involvement (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2005). Parents' involvement activities are depended on parents positively answering the questions: 'do I have the time and energy for involvement?' and 'do I have the skills and knowledge?' necessary for constructive involvement in the educational life of my child.

### **1.3 PARADIGM AND ASSUMPTIONS**

A qualitative case study research model will be utilized for this research study. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) share that qualitative research takes place in the "real world." The researcher is able to make sense of a phenomenon through the meanings people bring to the situation (Mertens, 2005). Furthermore, data collection takes place in the real world through methods resembling daily activities, such as conversations, diaries, letters, and notes (Boeije, 2010). This research design fits with my desire to come to a greater understanding of the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships. In addition, the qualitative case study research model fits the constructivist paradigm as defined by Lincoln and Guba (2000). Lincoln and Guba (2000) articulate the constructivist belief that "a goodly portion of social phenomena consists of the meaning-making activities of groups and individuals around those phenomena" (p. 167).



The constructivist paradigm expresses how social phenomena consist of the meaning-making activities of the involved participants. Hence, under a constructivist paradigm family/school partnerships would be considered socially constructed with meaning making developed through the activities of parents and school personnel. This type of a socially constructed phenomenon can be understood through a qualitative research design. Parents shared how they made sense of their interactions with the educational professionals working with their children in special education. Immersion into the parents' lived experiences allowed for growing understanding of family/school partnerships from the standpoint of parents of students classified with ASD. In addition, as the constructivist paradigm emphasizes the research as an extension of the values of the researcher, I was able to wrestle with the knowledge I had constructed in my role as the parent of a student with ASD and a professional in the field of special education. I was able to "understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge" towards family/school partnerships the participating parents of students with ASD had constructed (Mertens, 2005, p. 14). The research design of qualitative case study supported this coming to know of the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships.

According to Stake (2000) and Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) a case study is an exploration of a bounded system, which may contain a child, a classroom of children, parents, an event, a setting, a phenomena, or process. In this case study the bounded system was parents of students classified with ASD. The variations across families supported the gaining of greater insight into the psychological factors that motivated or stood as barriers to parental involvement.

As such, the research questions acted only as a guide to begin the study as the methodological implications of multiple realities did not allow for concretely established questions. Since multiple realities existed, the research questions evolved as I interacted with the participants (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995; Stake, 1995). Further, the concepts of importance in the study emerged from the parents, which modified the research questions. This approach allowed me to acknowledge the data interpretation as the parents' construction of family/school partnerships and how their developed meaning influenced their interactions.

Moreover, as the nature of reality was socially constructed, parents held different mental constructions allowing for multiple realities. As the parents were interlocked in an interactive process with family/school partnerships with each influencing the other, interviews served as the data collection method. The assumption was made, in line with the constructivist paradigm, that the data, interpretations, and outcomes were rooted in the parents' constructed reality (Mertens, 2005; Stake, 1995). However, to support the validity of a study multiple methods of data collection better serves the claims made in the interpretation of data. In order to alleviate the concern of using one data collection method, multiple sources of data were utilized (i.e., interviewing and document review of current IEPs). Additionally, this concern was acknowledged in the limitations of the study.

Interviews supported the interactions between the respondents and the researcher. Interviewing allowed for the gaining of multiple perspectives, which lead to better interpretations of meaning (Mertens, 2005; Stake, 1995). The interpretive meanings were compared and contrasted in order to construct the meanings parents attributed to their interactions with educational professionals working with their children with ASD. According to Mertens (2005) the "dialectical interchange involving the juxtaposing of conflicting ideas" supported the

“reconsideration of previous positions” (p. 15). The endeavor of constructing reality with the participants of the study allowed for discerning if the psychological factors of *role construction*, *parental efficacy*, *invitation to involvement*, and *perceived life contexts* played a vital role in the perception of parents of students classified with ASD towards family/school partnerships.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

While families are the first context in which a child develops, the school also plays a pivotal role (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). Families and schools are instrumental in the socialization of children. They are each a context in which the child's individual skills interact with the immediate environment resulting in growth and development. These contexts not only contribute to the child's development individually, so too does the interrelationships among these settings. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory of human development shows the more supportive the links between settings the greater the potential for healthy development (Patrikakou et al., 2005). In order to understand the multidimensional nature of family-school partnerships an ecological developmental framework, such as bio-ecological theory of human development, should be investigated.

### **2.1 BIO-ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

#### **2.1.1 Theoretical Framework of Bio-ecological Theory**

Bio-ecological theory of human development is based on the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). He believes that human development should be studied through the mutual accommodations that occur between:

An active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger context in which the settings are imbedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 190).

Found within this model of human development is the acknowledgement that this interactive nature occurs throughout the course of life. Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological paradigm for development in context is an extension of Kurt Lewin's classical formula that implies behavior is a joint function of person and environment. Bronfenbrenner substitutes *development* for *behavior* in order to capture the dimension of time, which was not a consideration in Lewin's original focus. With the context of time, Lewin's formula takes on the richer description found in Bronfenbrenner's (1992) translation:

The characteristics of the person at a given time in his or her life are a joint function of the characteristics of the person and of the environment over the course of that person's life up to that time (p. 190).

Bronfenbrenner (1992) allows us to understand that human development is a set of processes where the elements of the person and the environment interact to produce the constancy and change that occurs over the course of a lifetime.

To interpret a person's development we must come to understand the specific characteristics of the person as well as the characteristics of the multi-dimensional environments the person inhabits. Important to understanding the impact of family-school partnerships on the developing child is understanding the synergistic characteristics between person and environment. The environment is not a simple additive. Instead, the environment acts on the person, the person acts on the environment and the whole becomes something different than the

sum of its parts (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This becomes a point of great importance when conducting research in the area of family-school partnership. Through this lens, we understand that different developmental consequences can occur depending not only on the manipulations of the environment, but also on the personal characteristics of the individual. Not all interventions intended to increase or support family-school partnerships are going to have the same net effect on all families. To understand the dynamics and ramifications of family-school partnerships we must grapple with the complexities of humans and each environment they inhabit. In order to accomplish this task we need to move to an operational definition of Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework.

## **2.1.2 Operational Definition of Bio-ecological Theory**

### **2.1.2.1 Synergism.**

Bronfenbrenner's (1992) theoretical framework incorporates an analytic design of developmental processes and outcomes that are a joint function of the characteristics of the environment and of the person. Utilization of this design gives far more explicit evidence of the interplay of the biological and environmental forces. The analysis reveals both the harmful and benign circles found within the environment as well as the person. The phenomenon of synergism, i.e. the joint operation of two or more forces producing an effect that is greater than the sum of the individual effects, becomes clearly discernible. The richness of the resulting data reveals implications for preventive strategies. The preventive strategies then reflect back on the element of time.

Time gives us an understanding of constancy and change not only in the person, but also in the environment. Prior to the 1970s, researchers saw constancy and change as an element of people (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). After this time, attention became focused on developmental

changes as a result of life events or experiences. These experiences were not necessarily occurring within the person, but could be a part of the external environment. The critical feature was that the events changed the existing relationship between the person and the environment resulting in developmental change. This cycle of change occurred in the environment as well as the person leading towards the synergistic relationship found in bio-ecological theory.

#### **2.1.2.2 Four systems: *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem*.**

Lin and Bates (2010) utilized the conceptual framework of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory of human development to determine the impact of a home visit experience upon the perceptions of in-service teachers on teaching culturally diverse students. Bronfenbrenner (1992, 2005) proposed that the many aspects of a child's environment influence the development of the child. He further suggested this impact is bi-directional, i.e., the child works on the environment as the environment works on the child. Bronfenbrenner (1992) divided the environment into four systems: the *microsystem*, the *mesosystem*, the *exosystem*, and the *macrosystem* (see figure 1).

According to Lin and Bates (2010) a child has direct contact with the *microsystem* (see Figure 1), which contains the child's family, school, and neighborhood. The *mesosystem* (see Figure 1) refers to the connections between the elements of the *microsystem*, e.g. the connection between parents and a child's teacher. A larger system known as the *exosystem* (see Figure 1) contains the elements that have an impact on the child while not directly interacting with the child, such as the parents' occupations. While this system does not directly touch a child, it does affect all elements of a child's life. The *macrosystem* (see Figure 1) is the relationship that arises out of the other three systems and contains the belief system of a culture, cultural values, and laws. In Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory we are encouraged to think of the whole child and the

impact of a child's environment on his development. Lin and Bates (2010) conducted their study in order to examine teachers' perception of home visits and the possible effect on teaching. They found that home visits had a positive effect on the teachers' attitudes towards families of different backgrounds.



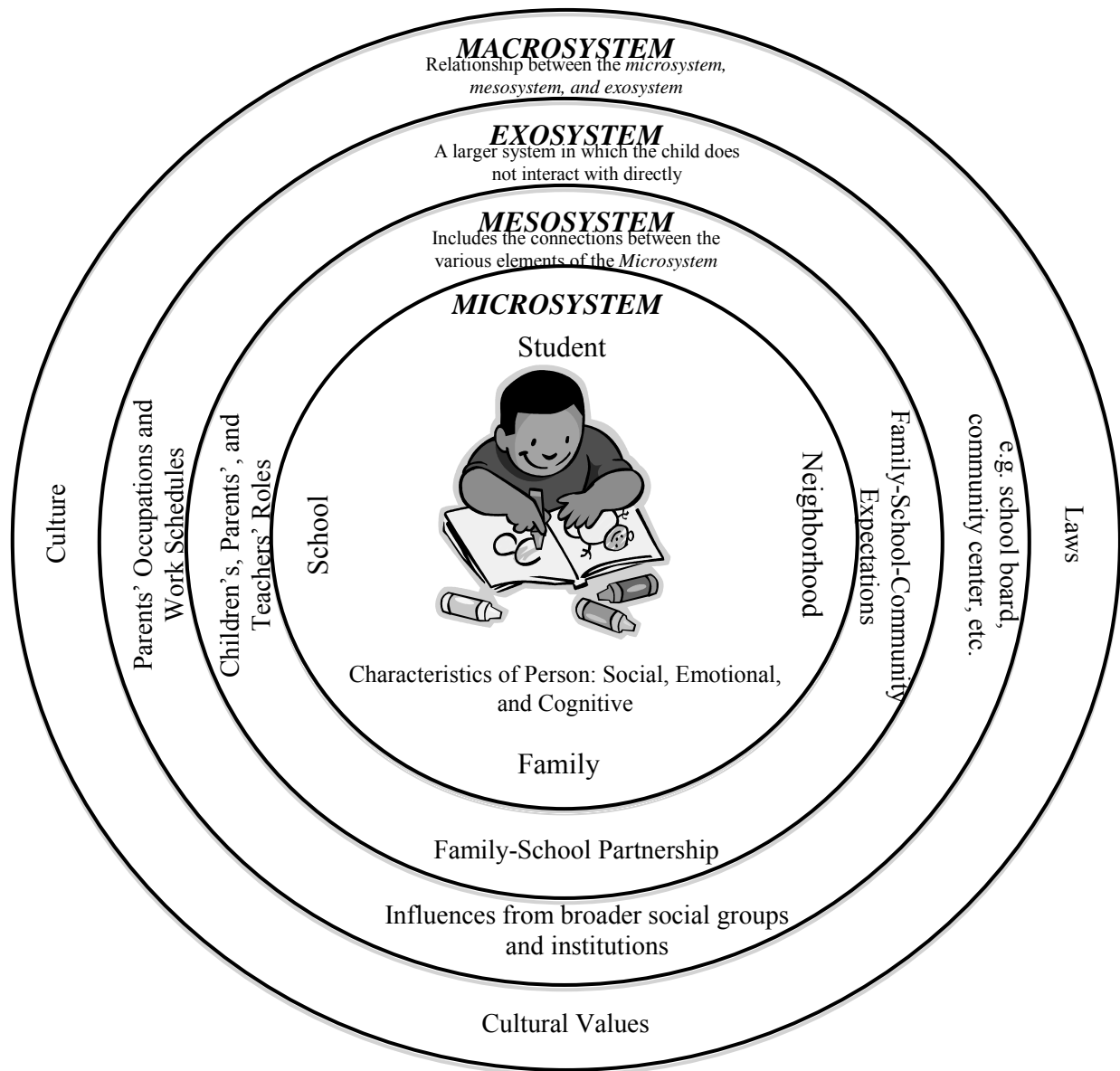


Figure 1. **Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory of Human Development**

Lin and Bates (2010) concluded that home visits are one way in which teachers can connect with the families of the children they serve. These visits allowed the teachers to see first hand the overlapping spheres of influence as they observed the students in the *mesosystem* of home and school. The study found this knowledge led to the teachers becoming more compassionate and empathetic as they reflected on their own teaching practices. The teachers expanded their knowledge of their students' *exosystem* and *macrosystem*. Home visits brought the teachers into contact with the parents' occupations, culture, attitudes, and beliefs. This knowledge gave them a better understanding of the family, the child, and the many spheres of influence affecting the student on a daily basis. In addition, this knowledge helped the teachers adjust their definition for parent involvement to one that more closely aligned with the parents' definition. The dialogue between the teacher and parent concerning active support for student learning then more accurately addressed the needs of the family as well as the teacher. Developing this working partnership became a primary focus of the teacher.

### **2.1.3 Family-School Partnerships in Bio-ecological Theory of Human Development**

#### **2.1.3.1 Attitudes and dispositions of teachers.**

In order for teachers to take the lead in developing partnerships with families they need to develop attitudes or dispositions that support the process. Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) isolated several key dispositions needed by teachers to work effectively with families. The first of these is a positive attitude towards families and the teacher-family relationship. To create a strong teacher-family relationship a teacher needs to focus on the assets of a family rather than any perceived deficits. Furthermore, Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) discovered that teachers must engage families as partners in the total learning experience to ensure the development of a positive

relationship with the family. In addition, teachers must believe in the family's ability to collaborate in the learning process and then engage in behaviors that support further development of knowledge and skills. Epstein and Jansorn (2004) found when schools build well-developed partnership programs based on parents' abilities more families become involved. As a result of increased parent involvement, students' perceptions become more positive about school and learning.

Another key disposition isolated by Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) is a commitment to communicate effectively. Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) advise teachers to communicate to families that their thoughts and feelings are respected. To accomplish, communication must happen in a positive and supportive manner that acknowledges parents primary role in the life of their children (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Commitment to effective communication allows teachers to develop perhaps the hardest disposition of an empowerment perspective for parents and families. Teachers should attempt to acknowledge families as essential partners with knowledge, concerns, and ideas that enhance student engagement and learning (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Families that are included in genuine and meaningful activities tend to become motivated participants. These genuine activities communicate a belief in the families' rights to be a full participant. The development of these key dispositions support teachers in communicating to parents their value and significance as partners in their children's education. Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) reflect on the importance of developing strong relationships with families to ensure that children reach their fullest potential. These relationships reached through key dispositions on the part of teachers support the bridge of successful educational partnerships. Successful educational partnerships also rest on understanding the centrality of a student's location within all systems.

### **2.1.3.2 Students' centralized location.**

Christenson (2004) argues that bio-ecological theory of human development provides a conceptual framework for organizing our understanding of students' centralized location within all the systems that bear impact on their lives. This model supports a culture of success for all students. The probability of students reaching success in their classrooms is heightened when schools make the family-school partnership a priority. In bio-ecological theory educators are proactive with parents, negotiating appropriate roles for parent engagement. These individualized roles allow the parents to support their children in a manner conducive to the individual. Different antecedents may be needed for each child in a family to reach the same outcome. Parents become essential partners and an atmosphere of shared responsibilities develops between parents and schools. The philosophy of shared responsibilities increases parents' motivation for collaborating.

### **2.1.3.3 Defining features of schools in bio-ecological theory of human development.**

Christenson (2004) asserted that there are defining features to a school that engages in family partnerships to optimize conditions for student learning. These schools have a student-focused philosophy that provides a framework for educators and families to cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate for student success. The domains of academic, social, emotional, and behavioral are front and center for all concerned. Educators and families work together to reach developments in these domains through enhanced learning opportunities and monitoring of educational progress. A belief in shared responsibility for the education and socialization of children is another essential feature. Christenson (2004) states "there are no prescribed roles or activities for families or educators; rather, options for active, realistic participation are created" (p. 84). The emphasis is on the quality of the interaction and ongoing connections of school and family.

The school and family create a relationship through which roles in promoting the social and academic development of a child can be determined. This allows for the focus to be on preventative and solution-oriented conditions that facilitate student learning and engagement. Bronfenbrenner's concept of development in context over time is captured in these defining features as we further analyze Christenson (2004).

#### **2.1.3.4 Principles of *circular causality*, *nonsummativity*, *equifinality*, and *multifinality*.**

Bio-ecological theory of human development provides understanding for the multi-dimensional influences on a child's learning. The degree to which the school and the family emphasize congruent socialization practices for students as learners is also discernible. The *mesosystem* captures the interconnections that occur within the different elements of the *microsystem*, i.e. the family, the school, and the neighborhood and the influences on the child. According to Christenson (2004) "the four systems principles of *circular causality*, *nonsummativity*, *equifinality*, and *multifinality* are relevant for the family-school interface" (p. 86).

*Circular causality* conceptualizes that change in one individual affects other individuals (Christenson, 2004). These changes then lead to changes within the group. In education this phenomenon is clearly seen when a student has difficulties within school, which results in problem behaviors at home. Conversely, family problems are often the catalyst for inappropriate behaviors being displayed at school. As the child acts out at school, the difficulties are brought home, compounded, and returned exponentially to the school environment. *Nonsummativity* refers to the concept of synergism, i.e. the whole is always greater than the sums of the parts.

In *nonsummativity* we become aware of the property of relationships and the impact of those relationships on the whole (Christenson, 2004). For a child having school difficulties a coordinating effort of the home, school, and community resources achieves a synergistic

relationship, allowing the end result to be greater than what the school or home could achieve individually. *Equifinality* refers to different antecedents leading to the same outcome. Families by the very nature of their diversity interact differently, but their children may all have the identical outcome of success in school. Due to this effect, bio-ecological theory of human development calls for multiple options for family involvement and participation (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2005). In bio-ecological theory of human development there cannot be only one path to the desired outcome or family diversity and interaction styles will keep some families from meeting with success. In *multifinality* we see that similar initial conditions may lead to different end results. Two families may give similar home support for a learning strategy, but have different end results on the completion of an assignment. The same strategy may not have the same impact on all students. Therefore having a standard recipe for parent participation may work for some families and not for others. Family participation must be designed to meet the individual needs of the student and his family.

#### **2.1.3.5 Contributions from multiple contexts.**

In education we have the opportunity to reframe our understanding of students' social, emotional, and cognitive development as a function of the contributions from multiple contexts. Christenson (2004) leads us to this understanding of development in context by noting the relevance of immediate settings (i.e., *microsystems* and the interaction with the larger contexts of the *mesosystems*, *exosystems*, and *macrosystems* for student outcomes). To further enhance this understanding educators need to focus on the reciprocal relationships among the systems rather than just the individual characteristics of one system. We must also attend to the individual's perception of a given situation to truly understand the multiple contexts in which a student learns and grows. The belief systems found within the *macrosystem* have a great impact on student

outcomes. What parents believe about education forms the foundation of the family's goals and practices, ultimately affecting the child's performance in school. If parents do not see value in homework they are not going to place great emphasis on the goal of supporting homework. Educators who understand that their students learn within the context of the family understand that in order for their students to reach optimum growth and development they must interface in a positive way with the family. According to Christenson (2004) not all educators understand the dynamics of the *mesosystem* and its impact on learning. Without learning interventions that include the family a school cannot embrace families as essential partners.

The failure to develop a family focus and an understanding that both the family and the school are contexts for child growth and development keeps a school from thinking systematically about student performance. Systematic thinking would ask the questions "What contextual influences enhance learning and development of children and youth? Or what conditions help this child make a personal investment in learning?" (Christenson, 2004, p. 87). The answers to these questions would allow a school to capture the degree to which the home and school are acting as collaborative learning environments for a student. This knowledge would also allow the school to create complimentary roles for the educators and families in order to best support student outcomes. Bio-ecological theory of human development helps all to understand the effect the *mesosystem* has on students' learning. Through this theory knowledge is developed to formulate instructional support for learning, home support for learning, and home-school support for learning that enhances students' engagement.

Research reveals the strength of family/school partnerships on student success (Christenson, 2004; Epstein, 2001d; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Continuation of learning time in the family and community context has been shown to improve student outcomes. Continuity of

expectations is also reinforced when learning flows through all contexts that are affecting a student. Epstein (2001d) argues that it has become increasingly clear that schools and families should collaborate in the responsibility of educating and socializing children in order to successfully prepare them for life. A social organizational perspective formed around a model of overlapping spheres of influence integrates and extends bio-ecological theory of human development to meet today's needs for family/school partnerships.

## **2.2 OVERLAPPING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE**

### **2.2.1 History of Family-School Relations**

Epstein (2001d; Epstein & Conners, 1995) begins her development of a theoretical model for family-school partnerships by reflecting on the roles of families, schools, and communities over time. Formal education in the eighteenth century was supported by a growing emphasis on basic knowledge (Reese, 2005). In the early nineteenth century parents and the community controlled schools (Epstein, 2001d). The focus was on preparing children for adult life as determined by the family and the church. During this time the community, including parents and church representatives, hired and fired teachers and determined the curriculum (Epstein, 2001d). The calendar was based on the needs of the family in an agrarian society. The skills needed were based on the knowledge contained within the family unit. The schools served as an extension of the family and the church, replicating the norms and values of the community. In the middle to later part of the nineteenth century a movement arose to provide mass education in order to restore social harmony to the country (Reese, 2005). Horace Mann, a school reformer of the



middle nineteenth century led the charge to build a system of schools based on the concept of a free, universal education (Reese, 2005).

The industrial revolution of the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries created different needs that were reflected in the changing dynamics between families and schools (Epstein, 2001d). Schools began to emphasize their special knowledge, distancing themselves from the family and community. A clash arose between those who believed schools needed to be democratic and humane and those committed to scientific management and business efficiency (Reese, 2005). For those committed to school improvement through scientific management, families were considered to hold primary responsibility from birth to age five in preparing children for school. Families were expected to teach children the behaviors and attitudes needed to meet with success in school. The school would further distance itself by leaving to the family the responsibility to teach children their ethnicity, religion, and family origins. Once a child went to school, the school was responsible for the teaching of a common curriculum to all children. The subjects taught were not reflective of the parents' school experience. Schools incorporated subjects reflective of the burgeoning needs of industrialization, using methods far different than those found in prior periods (Reese, 2005).

Accountability standards from the 1980s on have seen another major shift in family-school relations (Epstein, 2001d). According to Epstein (2001d) families desire a better educational experience for their children. Families are intent on staying informed and involved in their children's education. Reese (2005) shares the rising demands from the middleclass and the champions of the civil rights movement have focused school systems on school improvement. As a result the changing times have led to changing family/school relations. The theories upon which relations have been built have also gone through major shifts.

Family/school relations moved from the pattern of separation found in the 1930s through the 1950s to accommodate for the need for specialization in the marketplace. Schools reentered a period that reflected the former assumptions of the schools' proper role in the social betterment of the individual (Reese, 2005). This social change of the 1970s and 1980s caused a shift in collaboration between families and schools (Epstein, 2001d). Epstein (2001d) believes, however, that the necessary changes to an underlying theory to accommodate the new dynamics have not been forthcoming. As a result she has dedicated her research to the formulation of a theory that encompasses the changes that will continue to influence the interactions of families and schools.

### **2.2.2 Integrated Theory of Family-School Relations**

Epstein's (2001d) theory is built on a life-course perspective in order to integrate the useful strains of the different theories of family/school relations. This perspective integrates the characteristics of history, developmental patterns, and change. For Epstein (2001d) family-school interactions are currently guided by the age, grade level, and social/cognitive development of the children. She believes that elementary schools tend to be more family oriented, creating family-friendly atmospheres. Middle schools, however, experience a moving away from the closeness found in the earlier years of schooling (Epstein & Connors, 1995). Many middle schools focus on preparing students for interactions found within adulthood (e.g. government, work, and society).

High schools vary in their interactions with families. Some high schools are very intent on including families within the school process. Many families however tend to be involved only as far as their children are involved in the peripheral activities of high school (e.g., band

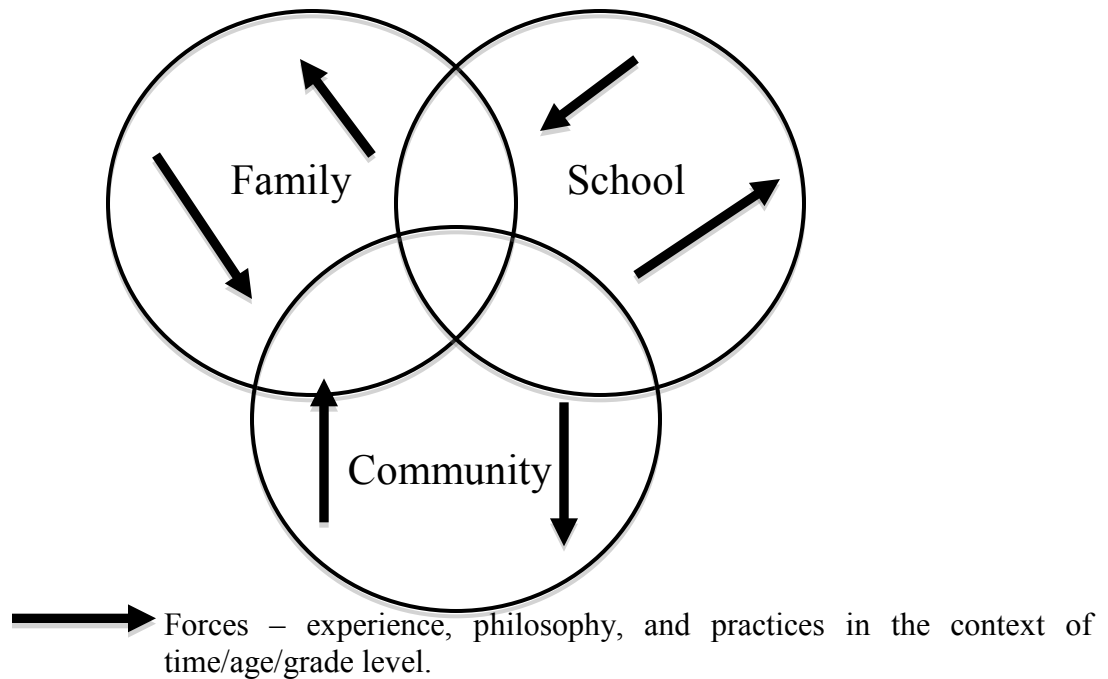
boosters, sports boosters, chorus, drama club, school musicals). High school parents generally engage in limited communication and involvement in their children's education. The optimal degree of family participation across a student's educational career for maximum learning and success is unknown (Epstein, 2001d). Epstein (2001d) believes though that a model of family-school relations should be based on a developmental framework that takes into account the continuity and changes that occur across time. Epstein's model incorporates Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory of human development understanding of the importance of time and the synergistic relations found in the context of environments.

Epstein (2001d) attempts to capture the ever-changing nature of families and schools in her model. As we see in bio-ecological theory of human development, families change as time goes by, as they develop new skills and knowledge, as they interact with all the contexts of their environments. As families change so too do the environments they inhabit. Each family develops a different relationship for each child within that family as well as all other contexts. The internal and external characteristics of each child determine different contexts and synergistic effects. Schools go through a similar process as different members come and go. New students, new teachers, and new administrators change the contexts of the school. Relations that develop between the new and the old also change the characteristics of the context. Epstein's model of overlapping family and school spheres "accounts for the history, development, and changing experiences of parents, teachers, and students" (Epstein, 2001d, p. 27).

## **2.2.3 Model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence: Family and School**

### **2.2.3.1 External structure.**

The external structure of Epstein's (2001d; Epstein & Connors, 1995) model of overlapping spheres contains the overlapping and the non-overlapping spheres that represent the family, the school, and the community (see Figure 2). The overlap between the three contexts changes over time, the experiences of the families, and the experiences of the schools. Time for Epstein (2001) "refers to individual and historical time: the age and grade level of the child and the social conditions of the period during which the child is in school" (p. 27). During periods of time spheres may be separate, not overlapping at all. The spheres for family and school during infancy may not overlap. A family may consider this period as one removed from any school influence. Another family, however, may consider this period as a time to prepare a child for structured learning. During this time the family may design interactions that facilitate learning behaviors in later years. The family would consider the needs of the classroom and the teacher to ensure learning success. The consideration would entwine the family and school, overlapping the spheres of influence. For children with autism, infancy through pre-school tends to have great overlap between family, school, and community. Early intervention services foster organized cooperative programming between all contexts to benefit the child. For all children the spheres overlap when they attend home, school, and community (Epstein, 2001d).



**Figure 2. Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence**

In the external structure, Epstein (2001d) captures the dynamics of the interrelationship of contexts found in bio-ecological theory of human development through the concept of *force*. *Force* according to Epstein (2001d) is “the experiences of and pressures on family and school organizations [and communities] and their members that need to be accounted for to study, understand, or change family-school relations” (p. 29). The developmental time and history line also serves as a force in the model. The forces push together or pull apart the spheres of interest over the course of time and development. The family, the teacher, the school administration, or the community can facilitate the pushing together and pulling apart. The forces can be occurring in the same direction or be counterbalanced to one another. Parents can decide to become more involved in their children’s school experience, perhaps by creating a homework regiment. The family’s homework regiment may emphasize a teacher’s homework protocol. In this case the forces are happening in tangent, bringing the spheres of interest into

greater overlap. It is in true partnership that Epstein (2001d) sees the maximum overlap between family and school. In maximum overlap frequent cooperative efforts are clearly discernible and close communication between family and school is occurring. Total overlap, however, will never occur as the school and the families always reserve some independence from one another (Epstein, 2001d).

#### **2.2.3.2 Internal structure.**

The internal structure comprises the interpersonal relationships and the influence patterns of the family, school, and community with the child holding the central place (see Figure 2). Interactions and influences occur within organizations as well as between organizations. Two levels of communication occur; that is to say standard communications that occur with all families and specific communications that occur based on the needs of a specific student (Epstein, 2001d). Personal relations and interactions build up as school staff create policies and procedures or have individualized interactions with families. The child holds the central place in the interactions and influences, as it is his well-being, which serves as the foundation.

Epstein's research suggests a partnership between the school and family is necessary to ensure family participation. In this partnership everyone works together by "sharing information, guiding students, solving problems, and celebrating successes" (Epstein, 2001b, p. 4). It is this sense of shared responsibility that ensures students are central to the partnership. The students are the active participants that pull all members together to promote student learning. The students actively communicate, invest in activities, and participate in decision-making. Through this process we see the emerging concept of "mutual interests and overlapping influence of schools and families and the roles that schools must play to develop and maintain

partnerships with students' families" (Epstein, 1992, p. 1139-1140). The school and the family share the major responsibility for ensuring a student's education. As captured above, Epstein's model for understanding school and family relationships is based on a social organization perspective of overlapping spheres of influence. The critical component within these overlapping spheres is the role of the child. The child serves as the catalyst of the family and school partnership. Through this conceptual framework we see the need to more fully understand the interrelationship of the internal and external structures and the centralized role of the child in the family, school, and community.

The internal and external structures function together, each influencing the other (Epstein, 2001d). A student exists within the many spheres of family, school, and community. The environments of the spheres exert different force upon the student over time and behavior (Epstein, 1992). At different ages and stages of development a student may find these environments closely aligned and exerting equal directional force. At other points competing interests may pull apart the students' environments exerting many counter-forces. The behaviors of these environments are captured in their background characteristics, philosophies, and practices. The background characteristics (i.e., cultural beliefs) exist within a student's family, school, and community and may act as reinforcers or barriers to the educational environment. "The [overlapping spheres of interest] model recognizes the interlocking histories of the major institutions that socialize and educate children and the changing and accumulating skills of individuals as the basis for studying connections that benefit children's learning and development" (Epstein, 1992, pp. 1140-1141). It is this interlocking history of family, school, and community, which necessitate schools to create processes that welcome families into a partnership.

#### **2.2.4 Framework of Involvement**

Epstein (2001c) conducted studies to ascertain what practices of partnership occur in the areas of overlap. Through this work, she was able to isolate six major types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (see Table 1). While the types of involvement may remain constant, the ways in which they are operationalized may be different in each school. Griffin and Steen (2010) analyzed schools that had collaborated with families and communities to develop and implement family-friendly programs. School counselors and families partnered in one school to increase school attendance and decrease behavior referrals. In another school, Griffin and Steen (2010) found a school counselor who co-created a program that emphasized collaboration between parents and the school. The program increased parent attendance at school sponsored events and increased parent-school communication. A task force put together in another school district served to reduce suspensions and expulsions rates. The task force included parents, students, community officials, and school staff. Together they developed an intervention based on improving discipline policy and procedures. In all examples, the six types of involvement served to organize behaviors, roles, and actions of the school staff, the families, and community members.



**Table 1. Epstein's Six Major Types of Involvement**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Involvement</b>	<b>Features</b>
1	Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills</li> <li>• Family support</li> <li>• Understanding child and adolescent development</li> <li>• Setting home conditions to support learning</li> </ul>
2	Communicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Open House</li> <li>○ Conferences</li> <li>○ Workshops</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Student progress Report Cards Progress Reports Daily School Reports</li> <li>• School Programs</li> <li>• School-to-home/home-to-school</li> </ul>
3	Volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PTA/PTO</li> <li>• Activities initiated by school</li> <li>• Recruitment</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Scheduling activities to meet families ability to volunteer</li> </ul>
4	Learning at home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Homework</li> <li>○ Curriculum-related activities</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Information concerning school procedures and grading scales</li> <li>• Support students to share and discuss work and ideas with families</li> </ul>
5	Decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include families in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Improvement teams</li> <li>○ Curriculum committees</li> </ul> </li> <li>• School board</li> <li>• PTA/PTO</li> <li>• Assist the flow of information</li> </ul>
6	Collaborating with the Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification and integration of community resources</li> <li>• Supporting students' and families' engagement in the community</li> </ul>

### **2.2.5 Bridges**

Joyce Epstein (2001a) speaks of the bridges that connect a student's home, school, and community. Students' lived experiences in all environments serve as the foundation upon which bridges are built. The strengths of the bridges determine how well students learn who they are and where they are going (Epstein, 2001a). When those bridges are built on well-designed processes and procedures that bring home, school, and community into alignment those bridges have a stronger ability to support student success. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to determine what elements are needed to ensure well-designed bridges. A further review of the literature gives us a greater understanding of the multiple elements that comprise and support parent involvement. This knowledge allows for the development of those processes and procedures leading to well-designed bridges between home, school, and community.

## **2.3 PROCESSES, MOTIVATORS, AND BARRIERS FOR FAMILY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

### **2.3.1 Processes for Family/School Partnerships**

Epstein (2001a) believes one of the most difficult challenges is to build bridges for school, family, and community partnerships that are inclusive of all families. An inclusive environment, however, can be accomplished if teachers, parents, administrators, and community partners come to know the children and families they serve: working together, and planning programming based on this knowledge. In order to ensure the inclusion of all families within the process of

family/school partnerships we must utilize an inclusive paradigm. Current paradigms tend to favor traditional parent and family involvement. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) define traditional parent and family involvement as focusing on the cultural rituals of school readiness activities (i.e. reading to a child, being involved in a child's education, and being involved in a child's school). Using a traditional paradigm, however, limits the possibility of structuring a family/school partnership that is richer and more inclusive. A family/school partnership built on bio-ecological theory of human development and Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence would ensure that the many socio-cultural contexts present in families are acknowledged and included within the design of programs. In this case, educators would envision a paradigm that values diversity and is inclusive of multiple cultures.

Parents are often labeled as not being supportive of education when they do not fit the traditional definition of parent involvement (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). A re-envisioned parent involvement paradigm would value all of the cultures that make up a school environment. Parents would be perceived as valuable contributors to the educational fabric of a school if teachers understood the ways in which parents already contribute to their children's education. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) offer up the example of the single parent who is working two jobs but has still found ways in which to be an active participant in her child's education. The parent may not make it to parent-teacher conferences, but sends a surrogate to ensure continuity in involvement and information. The parent may also interact with her child on the phone to monitor the highs and lows of the school day. Free time may be spent in enriching activities, such as visiting the zoo, playgrounds, attending church, the library, etc. Teachers who have closely examined their attitudes and perspectives about families will know if they are valuing the

richness and power of every family. Ultimately, our ability to recognize the diverse perspectives of family involvement will allow us to meet greater success with every student.

Furthermore, Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) worked to develop trust by acknowledging the multiple definitions for family involvement. They allowed the families to define their involvement by being responsive to the multiple ideas families brought to the endeavor. They sought frequent feedback concerning the family/school participation program from their families. Utilizing Freire's concept of problematizing, Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) focused on co-constructing family involvement. By adopting a concept of families as conscious beings able to pose problems of human beings in their relations with the world (Freire, 2008), communication becomes the hallmark of family-school participation. Just as "through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers" (Freire, 2008, p. 80) the families become jointly responsible in the growth of family/school partnerships. The teachers may present their ideas for family participation, but they are accepting of changes as families express their own ideas. This co-creating allows trust to develop between teachers and families.

The key process of appreciating and recognizing the linguistic and cultural background of children and families also played a prominent role in Souto-Manning and Swick's (2006) approach to family involvement. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) understood that their students were not independent and unattached to the world (Freire, 2008). This knowledge served to reinforce their desire to value their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as resources in the classroom. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) incorporated bilingual books and books featuring characters from many different socio-cultural backgrounds into their curriculum. They extended invitations to families to be involved in the sharing of their linguistic and cultural

backgrounds to increase possibilities for learning. The incorporation of the *macrosystem* allowed Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) to come to a better understanding of the family and the student, leading to stronger family/school partnerships.

Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) did not prescribe steps for family involvement, but gave a general outline of processes that would support strong family/school partnerships. So often family/school partnerships arise out of a deficit model, focusing on the deficits of students and parents. It is important to create a flexible framework for family/school partnerships that welcomes the diversity of families and students. Souto-Manning and Swick's (2006) sharing of their experiences encourages all educators to find their own path to forming strong relationships with their families. The opportunity to embrace the diversity of families as a resource increases the shared learning experience of teachers and students. Shared learning experiences will allow teachers, administrators, and families to add to the list of possible processes for the framework for family/school partnerships. Valuing families and the wonders that they bring to the process opens educators to what motivates families to become involved.

### **2.3.2 Motivators and Barriers for Family/School Partnerships**

Families' involvement in their children's education is believed to have many positive consequences. Empirical evidence (Brandon, 2007; Coots, 1998; Eccles & Harold, 1993, 1996; Epstein, 1992, 2001c, 2001d; Feuerstein, 2000; Hartas, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005; Pena, 2000; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001) shows that family involvement is an essential contributor to effective education for students. Family involvement has been found to influence student success regardless of economic, racial, or cultural background (Brandon, 2007; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Teachers are more

likely to create social and academic curriculum that meets the needs of their students when they have an in-depth and long-term understanding of students' strengths, needs, experiences, and problems. Parents are capable of ensuring that teachers have this degree of information concerning their children. In addition, children see that their parents value learning and the school environment when they have opportunities to observe their parents being involved. Children react to their parents' interest by becoming more committed to their studies. Ensuring that parents are involved proactively with their children's schooling becomes an essential responsibility for teachers and administrators. In order to support a proactive level of involvement it is imperative to understand the factors or motivators that influence families to become involved.

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) argue that in order for schools to increase family involvement, programming must be based on an understanding of the psychological factors that motivate parents to become involved. Their model (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005) suggest that parents become involved for three major reasons:

Parental *role construction* for involvement (Do parents believe they *should* be involved?), parental *efficacy* for helping the child learn (Do parents believe that their involvement *will make a difference?*), parental perception of *invitations* to involvement from the school (Do parents believe that the school *wants* their involvement?) and from the child (Do parents believe that the child *wants or needs* their involvement?; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005, p. 41).

A more detailed understanding of the three major reasons is revealed in research of factors influencing family involvement.

### **2.3.2.1 Role construction.**

Parental *role construction* is defined by Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel et al., (2005) as “parents’ beliefs about what they are supposed to do in relation to their children’s education and the patterns of parental behavior that follow those beliefs” (p. 107). Families base their behaviors on their beliefs on how children develop and what they can do to effectively support optimum development for their child (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Further, families look towards what they can do to support their children in school. *Role construction*, however, is also greatly influenced by the groups that are important to the families. Social groups of which families belong have expectations for what members’ behavior should be in relation to their children’s school. The social aspect of parental *role construction* is based on experiences with individuals and groups related to schooling.

In Sheehey’s (2006) qualitative case study on parent involvement in educational decision-making from a Hawaiian perspective we see the impact of a collectivist society on parental involvement behavior. Parental *role construction* is influenced by a view that elders and teachers are the sources of wisdom and truth. A cultural belief is held that education should be teacher directed. Communication is formulated in a contextual orientation where new information is interpreted through the lens of family and community experiences. In a collectivist society it is generally more acceptable to defer decision-making to professionals, accepting fully teacher and school communications. The parents expressed their belief that their role was to silently affirm the professionals’ decision-making (Sheehey, 2006).

Parental *role construction* was also investigated in a study of economically disadvantaged parents from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Drummond and Stipek

(2004) conducted over 200 interviews of parents of second and third graders. The parents were asked to rate how important it was for them to be involved in their children's learning in the areas of math and reading. The study (Drummond & Stipek, 2004) revealed that the parents believed it was their responsibility to be involved in their children's education. While the parents had the drive to be involved, further investigation found that the rate of involvement was higher in reading than math. The findings also showed that second grade parents rated the need to be involved higher than the third grade parents did. The result of Drummond and Stipek's (2004) study leads to the possible conclusion that there is an interrelationship between Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler (2005) three major reasons for involvement (i.e., at any given time while one reason may motivate, another may serve as a barrier). *Role construction* may encourage parent involvement, while parent *efficacy* or *invitation* to involvement may constrain parent involvement.

Pena (2000) explored the involvement of Mexican American parents in their children's elementary education. Pena (2000) also found parental *role construction* is based on the beliefs and expectations held by individuals and the socio-cultural groups within which they reside. The study was conducted through interviews, document analysis, and observations of parent activities over a one-year period. Analysis revealed that parental *role construction* was influenced by a cultural belief that educating students is the sole responsibility of the school and should not be interfered with by parents. Further analysis isolated cultural attitudes, language, and other factors related to the school and families to be barriers to family involvement at the elementary school. Language limitations kept many of the parents from active participation in school activities. The school had received a grant to install a dual language program, but was not implementing the program in all areas. Parents felt isolated from those activities that were not



conducted in Spanish and English. The language issue influenced how parents translated their role within the education of their children.

Language limitation is very notable as a factor influencing family involvement (Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2008; Lo, 2008; Pena, 2000; Turney & Kao, 2009). Parents' lack of fluency in English serves as a constraint when at parent meetings. Meetings that are held in dual language or supported by a translator find greater participation on the part of non-English speaking families. Schools can limit the impact of language limitations by conducting meetings in parents' preferred language, holding bilingual meetings or providing translators. Parents will believe their role is unnecessary if communication occurs in a method they do not understand. Language also affects the psychological factors of parental *efficacy* and parental perception of *invitations* to involvement from the school.

#### **2.3.2.2 Parental efficacy.**

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) define parental *efficacy* as the:

Belief in one's capacity to act in ways that will produce desired outcomes. Self-efficacy beliefs are a significant factor in personal decisions about one's goals, the effort one puts into those goals, one's persistence in the face of obstacles, and the accomplishment of those goals (p. 45).

Parental efficacy suggests that parents analyze their own ability to make a difference if they engage in the act of helping their children (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). If parents believe they are capable of making a difference they then create goals in line with that belief. If, however, they believe that they are not capable of reaching the desired outcome they will be less likely to create goals for involvement. Parents high in efficacy tend to become more involved than those

low in efficacy. In addition, parents high in efficacy are more likely to persist in times of struggle for their children. Believing in the ability to reach success supports parents' involvement through the bad times as well as the good. Conversely, parents will more likely distance themselves from the school if they believe they have nothing to offer their children in that domain. Brandon (2007) found when educators show a lack of respect for the interactions of African American parents the parents feel isolated from their child's education. This personal experience serves as a barrier to their feelings of efficacy.

Parental *efficacy* and *role construction* are socially constructed and grounded in personal experiences (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2005). Parents come to believe in their own capability when they have met with success in a given area. They also believe they have the right skills when they see others in their social-cultural group meet with success. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al. (2005) argue that verbal persuasion is effective in convincing parents they have the ability to effectively work with their children. Parents are also moved by words of encouragement from important people who demonstrate they have belief in the parents' ability. Positive feelings that occur when supporting a child will reinforce parental involvement. Educators' and administrators' encouragement of parents is an important element in the development of parental *efficacy*.

Ferlazzo (2011) shares the engagement experiences of an urban high school serving 2,000 students in Sacramento, California. Teachers and counselors spend the summer months making home visits to all incoming freshmen and high school students who have not yet passed the California High School Exit Exam. The meetings are structured around listening to the parents and gleaming information that allows the professional staff to better support student success. Professionals work hard to ensure that meetings are more than a one-way delivery of

information. While time is spent sharing with parents and students what to expect in the high school years, time is also spent learning the dreams and hopes of the parents and their children. The visits act as a way of reinforcing parent *efficacy* and *role construction* to better support parental engagement in the education of their children. As stated above, parents translate the educators' emphasis on parental knowledge as words of encouragement for parental involvement in student learning.

A meta-analysis of the literature on parental involvement and achievement conducted by Fan and Chen (2001) reinforces the importance of parental *efficacy* and *role construction*. Fan and Chen (2001) analyzed twenty-five empirical studies in which Pearson correlations could be obtained between parental involvement indicators and achievement outcome variables. The analysis resulted in an overall average correlation coefficient of approximately .25 between parental involvement and student achievement. The medium effect size represented by a .25 correlation coefficient suggests a noticeable and apparent effect. This medium overall effect suggests that there is a positive relationship between parental involvement and student achievement. In the breakdown analysis, Fan and Chen (2001) found the strongest relationship to exist between parents' aspirations and expectations and student achievement. Parents must believe that having aspirations and expectations for their children is a part of their role as parent. They must also believe in their ability to make a difference in their children's lives through encouraging their children to reach the goals that arise out of their aspirations and expectations. A caution must be raised on the interpretation of Fan and Chen's (2001) study due to the small number of relevant empirical studies available for the meta-analysis. However, the results do bear out the intuitive connection of parental involvement and student achievement in light of the psychological factors isolated by Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005).

### **2.3.2.3 Invitations to involvement.**

The last of the major psychological factors motivating parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005) is parental perceptions of *invitations* to involvement. Parental perceptions of *invitations* to involvement come from the school, the child's teachers, and the child.

#### ***Invitations to involvement from schools.***

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler (2005) describe invitation to involvement from the school as, "General school *invitations* include broad school attributes or activities that convey to all parents that involvement is welcome and that it is a valuable resource for supporting student learning and success" (p. 46). The school climate must be welcoming and positive to help parents to be secure in their involvement. A school structure that clearly welcomes parents in by keeping them informed of student learning and processes enhances the parent-school relationship. Teachers communicate their respect for parents and their involvement by disseminating ideas for home-based support for learning. This also reinforces the parents' belief that they are an important key in their child's learning success. Parents who feel uncertain about involvement, those who have a low degree of *self-efficacy* and *role construction*, benefit from this reinforcement.

This is especially important for parents who feel marginalized from their children's educational experience. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al. (2005) contribute that positive interactions on the part of school staff are important to parental empowerment and involvement. Brandon (2007) shares that African American families want to be involved in their children's schooling, but struggle with connecting with their children's schools. Educators and administrators have demonstrated a lack of belief in African American parents' willingness to be

involved in or value their children's education (Brandon, 2007; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006). As a result educators do not implement strategies that would encourage involvement and the parents retreat further away. This cycle becomes reinforced as time goes by leading to high dropout rates, high rates of school suspension, low student motivation, and a high rate of placement in special education programs (Brandon, 2007). Proactive engagement and communication becomes imperative to increase family involvement in order to reverse the detrimental effect on students.

Lo (2008) investigated the level of participation and experience of five Chinese parents of children with special needs. Lo (2008) found the parental perception of *invitations* to involvement was a major factor in the Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting. Parents communicated the constraints they encountered, which proved to be barriers to feeling invited into the process. Meeting times were scheduled two weeks in advance, but school administrators preselected times and locations. While the parents could respond requesting a re-scheduling of the meeting, the importance of the meeting stood in the way of such a response. Culturally the parents were predisposed to defer to the authority of the professionals, further reinforcing the need to accommodate. Observations on the day of each meeting displayed professional behaviors that proved to be additional barriers for invitation to involvement. Parents reported that they felt disrespected when professionals were late or left early. This behavior communicated to parents that their presence was not valued and that professionals were just attempting to fulfill what they perceived as an obligation. The behavior did not communicate to parents that their involvement was crucial to the success of their children.

Feuerstein (2000) also explored school-level factors and behaviors that influence parent involvement. He utilized the data set from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS)

of 1988, a nationally representative sample of eighth graders. Feuerstein (2000) found parent contact with the schools was greatly influenced by school attributes that convey to parents that involvement is welcome. He found that the most influential factor was the amount of contact initiated on the part of the school.

Schools that kept abreast of notifying parents of behavior, grades, general information, requests for volunteering, and school focus found the greatest degree of parent engagement (Feuerstein, 2000). Contacting parents in these instrumental areas led to an increase in parent volunteerism when requested. To gain greater parent response, however, the schools needed to contact parents based on several of the factors. Contact that focused on just one factor did not lead to greater interaction on the part of parents. The study reinforced that while some factors for family involvement are beyond the school's ability to influence, i.e. race, socioeconomic status (SES), family size; others can and are influenced by the school. Administrators and educators can encourage and create viable situations that increase students' sharing of their educational day with their parents. Furthermore, they can create a welcoming atmosphere in the school through visual displays, policies and procedures on positive responses to parents, and planned meetings and seminars that increase contact with parents. These endeavors convey to parents that their involvement is consistently welcomed and valued.

Coots (1998) conducted an ongoing, longitudinal study of families with 3 year olds with developmental delays. She isolated four categories to explain variations of participation on the part of parents. The four categories, child factors, parental attitudes, school characteristics, and family resources complement Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler (2005) psychological factors underlying parental involvement. Interviews were performed to determine if the four factors held true for involvement for families of children with developmental delays. Information and

parent confidence were found to be significant predictors of parental involvement. Parent confidence is a considerable feature of parent *efficacy*. Information was seen to be a primary component in parents feeling welcomed into the parental involvement processes of a school. Coots (1998) also noted the findings fit with Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence.

Coots (1998) expounded upon the correlation of influence between home and school. Her qualitative analysis found the parents who saw a higher degree of overlap between the spheres of home and school participated more than those who did not. This pattern is clearly articulated in Epstein's model based on her research of families of typically developing students. Finding this pattern in families of children with special needs is crucial when legal measures for special education are taken into account. Coots (1998) did not find the legal mandates for parental participation for children with special needs were paramount in parent participation behavior. Conversations with the parents pointed to some aspect of influence as a result of legal mandates, but not to any prominent degree. This finding is interesting to note in light of the legal basis for special education services. A further consideration of legal mandates for parental participation in special education will be reviewed in the last section of this literature review.

### ***Invitation to involvement from students.***

Prior to addressing the effect of laws on parental involvement decisions, a more complete discussion of *invitations* to involvement must occur. *Invitations* to involvement also come from children and teachers. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler (2005) describe *invitation* to involvement from the child "may come from child attributes (e.g., grade level, general school performance) and characteristic behaviors (e.g., difficulty with schoolwork or valuing of parental help)" (p. 47). Children invite their parents into their learning process for explicit and implicit

reasons. Children may request help from their parents when they are experiencing difficulty in a homework assignment. *Role construction* and *efficacy* play important roles in explicit invitation from the child. When parents are able to help and respond in a positive attitude they reinforce their children's seeking behaviors. Parents also become involved when they observe their children struggling in the learning process. Reports from teachers, grades on tests and assignments may act to invite parents into the process in order to support their children. Here too *efficacy* and *role construction* plays a major role in supporting the *invitation* to involvement. Parents with high *efficacy* and high *role construction* are more likely to react to implicit needs by becoming involved. Invitations from children may stand alone to encourage parental involvement.

Green et al. (2007) found student invitation to be a powerful motivator for parental involvement. Parents generally are committed to engaging in activities that support their children's success. Additionally, parents are receptive to the needs of their children (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995). Invitations from students can be increased by school policies and procedures to ensure greater parent participation. Teachers can structure activities that encourage parental support and guidance. Communicating clear and concise instructions for an activity can ensure greater parental participation. Eliciting student participation in the act of communicating the activity can act as an invitation for support from child to parent. Green et al. (2007) establishes specific invitation from the student lead to higher engagement in home-based involvement. Invitation from the student when combined with parents' self-efficacy beliefs, and self-perceived time and energy for involvement predicts strong parental involvement (Green et al., 2007). Moreover, structuring an activity to give parents an optimum amount of time to support their children, as well as creating a meaningful yet easy activity increases parental



involvement. Green et al. (2007) found the model constructs varied with age of child, decreasing as the children aged through school. This may be a reflection that parents' role construction changes as children assert greater independence.

Deslandes and Cloutier (2002) suggests that students of all ages, however, benefit from parental involvement. They believe parental involvement positively affects secondary students in the areas of better grades, higher aspirations, and fewer disciplinary issues. However, secondary students need to distance themselves from their parents in order to gain greater autonomy. This need leads to a delicate balance between taking greater responsibility for self while remaining connected to ones parents. Parental involvement would by necessity take on a different look to accommodate developmentally appropriate behaviors. Deslandes and Cloutier (2002) examines the types of parental involvement activities that are acceptable to secondary school students. They further investigate the impact of a student's gender and autonomy on their willingness to support parental involvement. In their study (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002), questionnaires were distributed to all secondary students taking government mandated testing in Quebec.

Data was based on student self-reporting (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002). Analysis was done on all samples prior to delimiting for gender and autonomy. A majority of the students responded favorably to help from parents. Students reported they asked their parents for assistance in determining a topic for a special project (86%) for school. They asked their parents to tell them what it was like when their parents were teens (82%). In addition, students stated they shared their learning successes (87%) with their parents, they brought home newsletters and information (84%) from school, and they invited their parents to attend school events (78%). A lower percentage of the students (60% to 72%) shared they asked their parents to listen to

something they wrote, to quiz them on material for tests, to work with them to raise their grades, and to discuss current events. Furthermore, students were less likely to seek guidance on scheduling courses, and interviewing parents for information and opinions. Students responded negatively to inviting their parents to attend a class trip (35%) and inviting their parents to visit their classes (33%). This may reflect students' need to gain greater autonomy in the eyes of teachers and peers. Parental involvement takes on a more private aspect as students' age, concentrating more on the individual need of students and their family.

Delimiting for gender (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002) revealed greater feminine support for parent involvement. A significant difference was seen in ten of the fourteen family-school activities. Agreement occurred in the two negative areas of parent attendance on class trips and visits to the classroom. In addition, males responded similarly to females in the areas of discussing current events and seeking help to improve grades. Secondary school males were as likely to engage their parents in these areas as their female counterparts. Deslandes and Cloutier (2002) tested for autonomy by performing a forced regression analysis on the variables of work orientation, self-reliance, and identity. The variables of work orientation and identity had a greater impact on students' willingness to support parental involvement activities. Females were more often swayed by identity, while males work orientation was the more powerful predictor of inviting parents into the school process.

Empirical evidence (Eccles & Harold, 1993, 1996; Epstein & Connors, 1995; Gonzalez, 2002; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Simon, 2004; Walker et al., 2005) confirms the importance of parent involvement in the educational life of students at all stages of development. Deslandes and Cloutier (2002) study captures the potential of secondary students' *invitations* to ensure parental involvement. The study reflects students' willingness to

invite their parents' into their schooling activities. Involvement may not look like parental involvement in the earlier grades. Simon (2001) analyzed the composition of family-school partnerships in secondary education. She found that while adolescents rely on other social networks beyond their families, they do continue to receive support and guidance from their families. Parents expressed that they continue to monitor their children's risky behaviors, discuss postsecondary education plans, spend free time with their children, attend school activities that their children are involved in, and track their children's educational progress. These areas reinforce Deslandes and Cloutier's (2002) findings and can serve as a roadmap for creating workable partnerships. Knowing students views allows administrators and teachers to design family-school partnership programs that take advantage of student support.

### ***Invitation to involvement from teachers.***

Just as students invite parents into participation in their schooling, so too do the practices of teachers (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005). Teachers' attitudes towards parents and teachers' active engagement in processes that invite parents in play a significant role in parental involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Parents' need for explicit information on how to support their children's learning acts as a powerful reinforcer for invitation to involvement. Specific invitations work to communicate the teachers' belief in the importance of parental involvement. In addition, teachers convey that parental involvement makes a difference in student learning. Examples of teacher practices that serve to invite parents in are encouraging parents to visit the classroom, frequent contact with the home, and assigning homework that includes parents in the process (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Walker et al., 2005). Unfortunately, not all teachers believe parents are key in the learning successes of their students.

Epstein (1986) shares that some teachers believe they can only be effective when they have the help and support of the parents. However, other teachers believe that their professional status is in jeopardy when parents become involved in school activities they believe are their responsibility. Epstein (1986) conducted a study to investigate parents' experiences with teachers who held these two perspectives on parent involvement. Surveys were sent to parents of 1,269 students in first, third, and fifth grade classrooms. The surveys were constructed to elicit parents' perception of the parent involvement practices of their children's teachers. The teachers were identified in previous research as either strong or weak supporters of parent involvement. The overall attitudes of the parents were very positive with 90% of the parents agreeing that their elementary schools were well run. However, despite their positive attitude parents did report that the teachers could do more to involve parents in the schooling of their children.

Epstein's (1986) study found a majority of parents were excluded from the traditional communications that occur between school and home. The parents did not receive phone calls, memos, or have parent/teacher conferences to communicate their child's progress in school. Few of the surveyed parents were involved in the classroom or spent time at the school. Epstein (1986) also found that parents' educational level only explained their experiences with parent involvement when teachers' practices were taken into account. Teachers strong in parent involvement included all parents equally in learning activities at home. Teachers who were not strong in parent involvement tended to include only those parents with less formal schooling. Unfortunately this pattern of behavior appeared to be built on negative expectations of a parent's and a child's ability rather than a desire to engage in parental involvement. Additionally, fewer teachers supported parent involvement as the students progressed through school. This pattern of

behaviors on the part of teachers kept parents from developing the possible repertoire of helping skills that would support students as they entered the upper grades of schooling.

Parents (Epstein, 1986) were found to be aware of teachers' efforts at parental involvement. Parents were attentive to being included in advancing their children's success through home-based learning activities. The parents with children in the classrooms of teachers dedicated to parent involvement were aware of the teachers' efforts. These parents received ideas on working with their children from the teachers. Furthermore, the parents were more knowledgeable of their children's instructional program and rated the teachers higher in interpersonal skills. Parents had greater trust in the teachers' skills and abilities. This trust extended to the school with the parents reacting positively to the school program and the merit of all the teachers in the school. Epstein's (1986) research established teachers' practices to have greater impact on parent involvement than school to home communication or parent volunteering in the school. Knowing this raises the importance of helping teachers to embrace a philosophy of parent involvement to eliminate the artificial boundary that can arise between home and school.

Patrikakou and Weissberg's (2000) study reinforces the findings of the importance of parents' perceptions of teacher outreach. As found in Epstein (1986), the more parents believed that teachers valued their input the greater the parental involvement. In addition, Patrikakou and Weissberg (2000) concluded parent perceptions were more influential on their actual involvement than the variables of race, marital status, and work status. The study consisted of parents from three inner-city elementary schools from a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. Two of the schools had a 100% African-American population and the other school consisted of a population that was 96% Latino. Parents of students from pre-kindergarten to third grade were

surveyed. The researchers had a return rate of 64% of the surveys distributed. The marital status and work status of the parent completing the survey was collected. The work status of the other parent was also collected. Interpretation of the data found parental perception of teacher outreach to be the only overall variable that was statistically significant in predicting parent involvement. For parent involvement in the home, race was also found to be significant. The language barrier in understanding assignments sent home with their children might have affected the level of involvement for the Latino families. Teachers need to ensure that they are considering all possible barriers that may occur when they seek parental input on home assignments.

Parent involvement in the school was also found to be dependent on parent perception of teacher outreach (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). Parents were more likely to be involved when they perceived teachers to welcome them into school activities. Parents perceived the teachers who kept them informed and provided the intricate details for an assignment as valuing parental involvement. These parents were more likely to go the extra distance to attend school events. The only other variable Patrikakou and Weissberg (2000) found to be significant for parent involvement in the school was family structure. The families that consisted of two involved adults were more likely to participate in school activities. This could be due to the greater ease in finding someone to watch the children. Offering support to families without easy access to childcare is one method administrators and teachers can utilize to assure parents that their involvement is wanted and valued.

The importance of teachers' communication was also captured in Drummond's and Stipek's (2004) study on low-income parents' beliefs concerning their role in children's learning. They found that parents are very susceptible to teachers' suggestions in how to engage in student

support. Parents responded positive to teacher suggestions of specific and easy to follow strategies. Clear communication of learning activities to be conducted at home increased parent-student engagement. This serves to invite parents into the process through clearly articulating the strategies and interventions that can be used at home to support student learning. It also serves to validate the professional's belief in parents' capacity to make a difference in their children's lives as learners. Over 80% of the parents responded they would work more at home with their children if they had clear and explicit directions from the teacher. Remaining committed to strong communication between the home and school allows the teacher to reemphasize the importance of parental involvement. Communication is also a key ingredient in the development of trusting relationships between teachers and parents.

The concept of trust is important to the development of a lasting partnership between teachers and parents (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel et al., 2005; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Invitation to involvement from teachers is a strong foundation for the development of trust. Soodak and Erwin (2000) found trust defined the relationship that developed between parents and schools. Parents state trust develops when teachers follow through on their word. Furthermore, parents of children with special needs share trust is dependent on teachers' follow through on the programs developed in the Individual Education Program (IEP). Information being clearly shared and disseminated on a regular basis serves to increase trust towards teachers on the part of parents. Parents need teachers to communicate the respect they hold for their students and their willingness to support their students' learning. Parents with children in special education communicate their need for teachers to support their decisions and opinions in order for trust to develop (Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Once trust is formed, parents state a more positive partnership develops. For these

parents a letting go of a need to be ever vigilant within the school occurs and they are able to decrease their physical presence in the school. A more healthy degree of interaction and trust between parent and teacher is able to take place.

Trust develops on different levels ranging from high-trust to low-trust (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000). People in high-trust relationships tend to believe the best of one another. In these relations events are interpreted from a positive viewpoint allowing parents and teachers to translate a variety of behaviors as trustworthy. Adams and Christenson (2000) relate the impact of trust on the reaction of parents and a teacher towards the behavior of a student. Parents and teachers who are new to one another will react in emotionally charged environments based on the tension that arises from the situation. Previous interactions of a positive nature can support the moving beyond the tensions of the situation to an effective dialogue and resolution based on trust. Furthermore, the trust level of parents significantly influences their attitudes towards and engagement in parent involvement activities. Parents who report lower levels of trust are less likely to be involved in activities and hold less positive attitudes towards involvement. Trust in parent-teacher relationships tends to stall in a connection that under recognizes positive behaviors and overemphasizes negative behaviors (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Teachers can play an integral role in increasing parent trust relationships through explicit invitation to involvement. In addition, trust and invitation to involvement goes a long way in mitigating the constraints that arise from parents' self-perceived life contexts.

#### **2.3.2.4 Perceived life contexts**

Through further research Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) refined Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model. In the revised model parental *role construction* and *self-efficacy* are captured in the construct of parents' motivational beliefs.



*Invitation for involvement* resides within parents' perceptions of *invitations for involvement* from others. This allows the model to better define the psychological underpinnings for parents' involvement in three constructs. The third construct comprises parents' *perceived life context* as defined by self-perceived time and energy, as well as self-perceived skills and knowledge. These *life contexts* exist within other elements of families' and students' lives as captured in bio-ecological theory. A family's socioeconomic status and culture influences all of the psychological underpinnings for parents' involvement. While *life contexts* are influenced by these status variables, families' perceptions of their *life contexts* shape their decisions for involvement (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2005).

The *life context* of self-perceived skills and knowledge serves to shape parents' involvement activities. Hui-Chen Huang and Mason (2008) found that parents were willing to empower themselves with knowledge. Their study was centered in a Head Start Program in a mid-western urban city. African American families were interviewed in a focus group format. The focus group was guided by questions concerning involvement in a literacy program and parents' views on their children's education. Parents shared that they worried about their own lack of knowledge in literacy strategies. They were afraid they did not have the ability to work with their children effectively. However, the parents also expressed a strong desire to learn the necessary skills. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) also found parents were much more willing to engage in activities when they felt competent. Empirical evidence (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hui-Chen Huang & Mason, 2008) clearly shows the importance of providing parents with learning opportunities to

develop the knowledge and skills necessary for involvement. Parents remain focused on supporting their children's learning when they have the necessary knowledge and skills.

As children age through school parents once again question their ability to help. Empirical evidence (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2005) reveals that parental help with homework decreases as the subject matter comes close to or exceeds parental knowledge. Parents struggle with content knowledge, as well as with how the information should be taught. For some families not knowing the methods of instruction stands as a barrier to supporting student learning. Feedback from teachers that a parent's method is incorrect or not the method utilized in the classroom causes parents to question their ability to help (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995). Another factor that may be influencing parents' decrease in parental involvement is the parents' sensitivity to developmental changes in their children. The greater need for autonomy as children age causes many parents to decrease their level of involvement (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Simon, 2004). Balancing the need for parental involvement and the need for autonomy for developing children must become a focus for parent involvement activities. Schools and teachers must keep this balance in mind when selecting possible outreach activities to encourage parental involvement.

As discussed in school and teacher invite, the outreach activities of schools is substantially linked to parental involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Simon, 2004). Dauber and Epstein (1993) found the strongest predictor of parental involvement to be school and teacher practices. Data was collected from parents in a study of eight Chapter 1 schools in Baltimore. The data was analyzed to determine the practices

and patterns of parental involvement through the perception of the parents. Dauber and Epstein (1993) examined the parents' reports to determine parental attitudes and practices towards parents own involvement at home and school, parents' perceptions of their school's outreach, and their wishes for future school practices. They found parents were more likely to become involved regardless of skills and knowledge when schools practiced strong involvement activities and outreach. Dauber and Epstein (1993) found this to be true across all areas of their research, i.e. parents engaging in school activities and events, and at home supporting homework. Schools' outreach practices can help to mitigate parents' self-perceived life contexts.

The *life contexts* of time and energy also play a role in parents' perception of involvement in their children's education (Bartel, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2005). Parents are constrained by the impact of work and other family responsibilities on their time and energy. Employment that is very inflexible and highly structured keeps parents from attending school events. Garcia Coll et al. (2002) found that sociodemographic variables such as income and occupation affect parental time and energy. Bartel's (2010) families tended to work 40 hours a week in occupations that did not allow for the flexibility needed to attend daytime events. Even so these parents worked hard to be actively involved in their children's education. She observed the parents discussing the school day with their children, ensuring someone in the family spent time reading with their children, and attending to communication with teachers. Teachers need to gain greater insight into the factors that affect parental involvement. This knowledge allows teachers to modify their definition of parental involvement to accommodate parents' *life contexts*. Once this occurs teachers are able to develop parent involvement strategies that better reach the needs of these parents. The children reap the benefits of their parents' involvement and their teacher's efforts (Bartel, 2010).

Parents with family obligations that are above and beyond the norm may also struggle in the life contexts of time and energy (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2005). Parents struggle to attend school events when they have to attend to the care of multiple pre-school children. Moreover, parents with eldercare obligations may have to divide their time to ensure all responsibilities are met to the best of their ability. Families with children with special needs experience the additional time constraints of the medical and developmental needs of their children. These needs often entail additional appointments for physical, occupational, and speech therapy, as well as medical visits. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) find parents deal with the constraints of life contexts by seeking ways of being involved with their children that fit within these constraints. Across the empirical evidence (Brandon & Brown, 2009; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000) parents stress their belief in the importance of parental involvement in children's education. The perceived *life contexts* of skills, knowledge, time, and energy influence the motivators for parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005).

### **2.3.3 Summary of Processes, Motivators, and Barriers for Family-School Partnerships.**

Schools must keep firmly in mind the motivators and barriers families experience when they design processes for parental involvement. The body of evidence analyzed in this literature review suggests parents' decisions concerning involvement in their children's education are based on their sense of *role construction* for involvement, their belief in their capacity to help their child succeed in school (*efficacy*) and their perception of others' desire for their involvement (*invitation for involvement from others*). These psychological factors are framed by

life-context variables, such as skills, knowledge, time, and energy. Life-context variables are further influenced by parents' socioeconomic status (SES), as well as the families' culture and community. Schools must develop a broad understanding of the SES and cultures found within their environment in order to facilitate parental involvement. While many of the circumstances that impact parents' SES are beyond a school's control, many others can be effectively responded to in a manner that increases parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005).

While schools cannot fix all of the underlying causes that may limit lower SES families' involvement, schools can structure programs that help to mitigate the impact (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005). A parent's time and energy for involvement may be influenced by the inflexible positions in employment held at the lower end of SES. Schools may not be able to change the inflexible nature of the workplace; they can restructure opportunities for involvement in light of this constraint. Schools can and should provide flexibility in meeting times, accommodations to increase parental access to resources that are in their power to provide, and a genuine acceptance of the limitations that families may experience. A family's culture must also be considered as a construct that affects parental involvement.

Family culture serves as an important dynamic in the process of parental involvement. Schools need to understand and respect the cultures of the students and families that they serve and the impact culture has on parental involvement. As seen in this literature review, culture affects how parents respond to *invitations* to involvement, *parental efficacy*, and *role construction*. An understanding of this connection between culture, psychological factors for involvement, and life contexts is imperative to unleash the full ability for parental involvement to support student success. Schools must accept and create processes for involvement that respect

cultural limitations to involvement that differ from the dominant U.S. culture. Language barriers and limited understanding of school expectations and policies often stand in the way of parental participation for first and second-generation immigrant groups (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005). In addition, perceptions of not being welcomed in due to differences in culture lead families to believe they are powerless to break through the barriers. Schools can and some do create processes that mitigate barriers and utilize family culture to the advantage of their students.

What has been learned through this literature review is that schools have the power to influence parental decision for involvement. Schools can create processes to increase *role construction*, *parental efficacy*, and *invitations* to involvement. As a result schools would be supporting parents' effectiveness in helping their children to learn. Children's increased success in learning would help school districts to reach mandated state and federal outcomes. Positive, productive family-school partnerships have the potential to ensure we reach excellence in education for all of our children. However, families with children with special needs face additional challenges in their potential family/school partnerships. Parental involvement in special education is framed by federal and state legislation and case law, which interprets implementation. To further our understanding of these challenges an analysis of the complex interaction of legislation, court rulings, and education must occur.

### **3.0 FAMILY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW**

#### **3.1 EDUCATION FOR ALL HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ACT, P.L. 94-142, 20**

##### **U.S.C. SECS. 1400 ET SEQ.**

In 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142 changed the lives of children with disabilities. Congress found:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities (P.L. 94-142).

Before the enactment of Public Law 94-142 the needs of children with disabilities were not addressed in our educational system. Many children with disabilities attending public schools went undiagnosed. Those children diagnosed with disabilities were often denied access to public schools; they were not permitted to attend public schools with their non-disabled peers (Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007). Public schools that did allow children with disabilities to attend often lacked adequate resources to ensure the children received appropriate services. Public Law 94-142 was enacted to ensure children with disabilities and their families' access to a free

appropriate public education (FAPE). The law (P.L. 94-142) provided for zero reject, nondiscriminatory evaluations, individualized and appropriate education, least restrictive environment, procedural due process, and parent participation. The hope was for an educational system that would provide improving educational results for all children with disabilities.

However, the implementation of the law did not lead quickly to the hoped for results. Low expectations for students with disabilities have kept school systems from reaching the lofty goals incorporated into the law (PCESE, 2002). A lack of applying evidence-based methods of teaching and learning for children with disabilities has impeded student success. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004), over 30 years of research shows students with disabilities need to have higher expectations set in order for education to be effective. Children with disabilities must be assured access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom to the maximum extent possible if they are to reach the developmental milestones necessary to meet the rigorous standards now set for all children. For the goals of the law to be met the role and the responsibilities of parents need to be strengthened. Families of children with disabilities must have meaningful opportunities to participate in the educational lives of their children.

Including parents in a meaningful manner ensures that special education remains a service rather than a place in which to send non-performing children (IDEIA, 2004). Coordinating all resources of the local, state, and federal government becomes paramount to make certain parents and children with disabilities have full access to public education. The law further finds that while the state and local educational agencies hold primary responsibility for providing an education for all children with disabilities it is in our best interest as a nation for the federal government to take a supporting role in the providing of these services (IDEIA, 2004).



The federal government is able to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources for the providing of educational services. The federal government's commitment to greater understanding for parents is captured in P.L. 94-142 in the six major principles contained in the law: zero reject; nondiscriminatory identification and evaluation; free, appropriate public education; least restrictive environment; due process safeguards; and shared decision-making with parents. The creation of parent resource centers and technical assistance for parent training ensures parents the necessary level of understanding to fully engage in their children's educational experience. This commitment is reiterated and refined in the progression of federal/state education laws that frame public education, special education and related services (see Table 2). In particular IDEIA (2004) frames our current services for children with disabilities and the underlying theme of parent/school partnerships.

**Table 2. Progression of Federal Education Laws that Frame Public Education, Special Education and Related Services**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Act</b>	<b>Public Law/ Amendments</b>	<b>Established</b>
1965	Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)	20 U.S.C. Secs. 3801-3900 Now: 20 U.S.C. 7801	Provides federal funding for schools based on the number of children living at or below the poverty level.
1966	ESEA	P.L. 89-750	Established federal grants to states to assist educating students with disabilities.
1970	ESEA	P.L. 91-230	Updated federal grant-in-aid program
1974	ESEA	P.L. 93-380	Goal of full educational opportunities for children with special needs.
1994	ESEA name changed to Goals 2000: Educate America Act	P.L. 103-227	National goals for postsecondary employment for all students.
1994	Name changed to Improving America's Schools Act	P.L. 103-382	Reform of public education, accountability standards, assessment requirements, and linkage between general and special education.
2001	Name changed to No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)	P.L. 107-110	Established six principles for education: accountability, school safety, parental choice, teacher quality, scientifically based methods, and local flexibility.
1975	Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975	P.L. 94-142, 20 U.S. C. Secs. 1400 et seq.	Zero reject, nondiscriminatory evaluations, individualized and appropriate education, least restrictive environment, procedural due process, and parent participation.
1978	Education for All Handicapped Children Act	P.L. 95-561	Statutory regulations for schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.
1983	Education for All Handicapped Children Act	P.L. 98-199	Preschool special education programs, early intervention, and transitioning programs.
1986	Education for All Handicapped Children Act	P.L. 99-372	Recovery of attorney fees.
1986	Education for All Handicapped Children Act	P.L. 99-457	Authorized infants and toddlers.

1990	Name changed to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)	P.L. 101-476	Guarantees a free appropriate public education to all children with disabilities – reaffirms that special instruction and related services must be designed to meet their needs.
1997	IDEA	P.L. 105-17	Discipline provisions and recovery of attorney’s fees for the prevailing party.
2004	IDEA	P.L. 108-446	Reauthorized IDEA and changed provisions for discipline, evaluation, appropriate education, and procedural due process (parental involvement).
1974	Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA)	P.L. 93-380, 20 U.S.C. 1232g	Parent and student consent rights for educational records
1998	FERPA	P.L. 105-244	Incorporated into IDEA

**3.2 INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT ACT, P.L.  
108-446, 20 U.S.C. SECS. 1400 ET SEQ.**

**3.2.1 Section 601 (20 U.S.C. 1401) Purposes.**

A purpose of IDEIA, which also pertains to family/school partnerships, is to ensure:

- (1) (B) That the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected;
- (3) That educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities by supporting system improvement activities; coordinated research and personnel preparation; coordinated technical assistance, dissemination, and support; and technology development and media services; and...(P.L. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 601).

P.L. 94-142 (1975) was groundbreaking in its affirmation of the rights of parents to be fully engaged in the education of their children with disabilities. Parental rights to participate are reemphasized in the reauthorization of IDEIA (2004) as seen in sections 601, 614, 615, 671, 672, and 673 (P.L.108-446, 20 U.S.C.). In Sections 601, 614, and 615, parents are ensured of their rights to be included in all stages of the special education process. IDEIA (2004, Sec. 614) confirms parental participation in the areas of identification for services, the development of an individualized education program (IEP) and assessment of student progress. Section 615 concerns procedural safeguards, which also serve as a part of the foundation for parent/school partnerships. Parents must be presented procedural safeguards and the school district must assure that parents understand their rights as well as the rights of their children. IDEIA (2004) Subpart 3, supports to improve results for children with disabilities, contains three sections

instrumental in the forming of strong parent/school partnerships: Section 671 pertains to parent training and information centers, Section 672 community parent resource centers, and Section 673 technical assistance for parent training and information centers. An analysis of the law clarifies the roles and responsibilities of schools and parents to form strong family/school partnerships that lead to the betterment of educational services for children with disabilities.

### **3.2.2 Section 614 (20 USC 1414) Evaluations, Eligibility Determinations, Individualized Education Programs, and Educational Placements.**

#### **(a) Evaluations, Parental Consent, and Reevaluations**

##### **(i) Initial evaluations.**

##### **1. Parental consent.**

##### **(i) In general.**

ix. Consent for initial evaluation to determine if the child qualifies as a child with a disability as defined in section 602 shall obtain consent from the parent of such child before conducting the evaluation. Parental consent for evaluation shall not be construed as consent for placement for receipt of special education and related services.

xxv. Consent for services. An agency that is responsible for making a free appropriate public education available to a child with a disability under this part shall seek to obtain informed consent from the parent of such child before providing special education and related services to the child.

##### **i. Absence of consent.**

ix. For initial evaluation. If the parent of such child does not provide consent for an initial evaluation under clause (i) (I), or the parent fails to respond to a request to provide the consent, the local educational agency may pursue the initial evaluation of the child by utilizing the procedures described in section 615, except to the extent inconsistent with State law relating to such parental consent.

(II) For services. If the parent of such child refuses to consent to services under clause (i) (II), the local educational agency shall not provide special education and related services to the child by utilizing the procedures described in section 615.

In the case of a parent refusing initial special education and related services for their child with disabilities the local educational agency is not considered in violation of the requirement to provide FAPE for that child (IDEIA, 2004). An IEP meeting will not be convened for the child and an IEP will not be developed. The parents are given full decision-making rights under the law in light of initial services for their child with a disability.

Parents of children with a disability receiving special education and related services are assured of their involvement through the IEP process. The IEP continues to direct the educational needs of classified students. IDEIA (2004) Section 614 states the IEP must contain the evaluation criteria utilized, the present levels of functioning of the student, a determination of educational needs, the goals and objectives based on education needs, placement that will support the reaching of the determined goals and objectives, and the duration of the special education and related services to be provided. The members of the IEP team, which includes the parents, gather the aforementioned information in order to develop an educational program that meets the needs of the child. Quality family/school collaboration must occur in order to develop an effective program. Educators and parents must build positive relationships to ensure that all

rights developed through legislation are provided to students with disabilities through the collaborative efforts of the IEP process.

### **3.2.2.2 Section 614 (d) Individualized Education Programs.**

(1) Definitions in this title:

(A) Individualized education program.

(i) In general. The term ‘individualized education program’ or ‘IEP’ means a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with this section...

(B) Individualized education program team. The term ‘individualized education program team’ or ‘IEP Team’ means a group of individuals composed of:

The parents of a child with a disability...

(vi) At the discretion of the parent or the agency, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel as appropriate...

(C) IEP team attendance:

(i) Attendance not necessary. A member of the IEP team shall not be required to attend an IEP meeting, in whole or in part, if the parent of a child with a disability and the local educational agency agree that the attendance of such member is not necessary because the member’s area of the curriculum or related services is not being modified or discussed in the meeting.

(ii) Excusal. A member of the IEP Team may be excused from attending an IEP meeting, in whole or in part, when the meeting involves a modification to or discussion of the member's area of the curriculum or related services, if...

(I) The parent and local educational agency consent to the excusal; and

(II) The member submits, in writing to the parent and the IEP Team, input into the development of the IEP prior to the meeting.

(iii) Written agreement and consent required. A parent's agreement under clause (i) and consent under clause (ii) shall be in writing.

(3) Development of IEP.

(A) In general. In developing each child's IEP, the IEP Team, subject to subparagraph (C), shall consider...

(ii) The concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child...

(F) Amendments. Changes to the IEP may be made either by the entire IEP Team or, as provided in subparagraph (D), by amending the IEP rather than by redrafting the entire IEP. Upon request, a parent shall be provided with a revised copy of the IEP with the amendments incorporated.

### **3.2.2.3 Section 614 (e) Educational Placements.**

Each local educational agency or State educational agency shall ensure that the parents of each child with a disability are members of any group that makes decisions on the educational placement of their child.



#### **3.2.2.4 Section 614 (f) Alternate Means of Meeting Participation.**

When conducting IEP team meetings and placement meetings pursuant to this section, section 615 (e), and section 615 (f) (1) (B), and carrying out administrative matters under section 615 (such as scheduling, exchange of witness lists, and status conferences), the parent of a child with a disability and a local educational agency may agree to use alternate means of meeting participation, such as video conferences and conference calls.

While IDEIA (2004) ensures parents a strong role in the creation of their children's special education program, many parents feel alienated from the process (Fish, 2006, 2008). Educators and parents often experience friction as they attempt to navigate the IEP process (Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002; Ivey, 2004; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Often parents' knowledge of their children with disabilities is not given the status intended by the law (IDEIA, 2004). During these times, the IEP is driven by teacher assessment unencumbered by the information parents bring to the process. The relegation to a nominal role causes great frustration for parents. The IEP becomes a document given to families rather than one in which they take an equally active role in creating. Fish (2006) found parents did not feel valued by educators during the IEP process. The parents did not believe they were treated as equals and felt educators viewed the IEP process as a mere formality. The parents did not feel *invited* into the process or recognized for their skills and their knowledge of their children with disabilities. As seen throughout this literature review, outreach on the part of the school and education professionals is paramount to parents' participation. School outreach holds even greater importance when discussing participation of families of children with disabilities.

Section 614 (f) (IDEIA, 2004) mandates schools to *invite* parents into the IEP process in a manner that is as convenient for the parents as possible. If parents are unable to attend meetings at the school building, technology is to be used that allows parents to attend virtually. Phone and video conferencing is to be utilized to ensure parents of children with disabilities equal access to the IEP process. A willingness to embrace alternate means of meeting participation communicates to parents their value in determining their child's programming.

### **3.2.3 Section 615 (20 USC 1415) Procedural Safeguards.**

(a) Establishment of Procedures. Any State educational agency, State agency, or local educational agency that receives assistance under this part shall establish and maintain procedures in accordance with this section to ensure that children with disabilities and their parents are guaranteed procedural safeguards with respect to the provision of a free appropriate public education by such agencies.

(b) Types of Procedures. The procedures required by this section shall include the following:

(1) An opportunity for the parents of a child with a disability to examine all records relating to such child and to participate in meetings with respect to the identification, evaluation, and education placement of the child, and the provision of a free appropriate public education to such child, and to obtain an independent educational evaluation of the child.

(3) Written prior notice to the parents of the child, in accordance with subsection

(c) (1), whenever the local educational agency...

(A) Proposes to initiate or change; or

(B) Refuses to initiate or change, the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of the child, or the provision of a free appropriate public education to the child.

(4) Procedures designed to ensure that the notice required by paragraph (3) is in the native language of the parents unless it is clearly not feasible to do so.

(5) An opportunity for mediation, in accordance with subsection (e).

(e) Mediation.

(1) In general. Any State educational agency or local educational agency that receives assistance under this part shall ensure that procedures are established and implemented to allow parties to disputes involving any matter, including matters arising prior to the filing of a complaint pursuant to subsection (b) (6), to resolve such disputes through a mediation process.

(2) Requirements. Such procedures shall meet the following requirements:

(A) The procedures shall ensure that the mediation process...

(i) is voluntary on the part of the parties;

(ii) is not used to deny or delay a parent's right to a due process hearing under subsection (f), or to deny any other rights afforded under this part, and

(iii) is conducted by a qualified and impartial mediator who is trained in effective mediation techniques.

(B) Opportunity to meet with a disinterested party. A local educational agency or a state agency may establish procedures to offer to parents and schools that choose not to use the mediation process, an opportunity to meet, at a time and

location convenient to the parents, with a disinterested party who is under contract with...

- (i) a parent training and information center or community parent resource center in the State established under section 671 or 672; or
- (ii) an appropriate alternate dispute resolution entity, to encourage the use, and explain the benefits, of the mediation process to the parents.

Section 615 of IDEIA (2004) provides a system to deal with grievances that arise in the process of providing special education services. Due process rights are a significant part of the grievance process and have been addressed once again in IDEIA (2004) under parental responsibilities as well as parental rights. IDEIA (2004) imposes noteworthy responsibilities on the parents of children with disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities are expected to partner with school professionals in the decision-making process. Parents must now take additional steps in the due process system if they believe their children's needs are not being met. If parents do not agree with the program designed by the IEP team they must provide legally sufficient notice to the school district. In this communication they must share their perception of the educational problem, as well as their proposed solution to the problem. Parents are strongly encouraged to engage in mediation prior to a due process hearing.

Mediation gives all parties a space in which to resolve problems and concerns eliminating the need to engage in a full due process hearing. Parents must disclose at this time all evaluations and recommendations they plan on using should the matter go forward to due process. School districts must be allowed to remedy the problem prior to parents recovering attorney fees. The requirement encourages parents to actively participate in mediation and the IEP process. Also, parents are protected in the law, as mediation cannot be used simply to allow

time to go by. School districts must enter into the process in good faith to reach an equitable solution for the parents' concern, if at all possible. Mediation allows schools and families to solve impasses that may arise in positive and constructive ways. The rights of children with disabilities and by extension their parents are reinforced through this concept of FAPE. However, to enter into the special education process parents must have the necessary knowledge.

#### **3.2.4 Section 670 (20 USC 1470) Purposes.**

The purposes of this subpart are to ensure that...

- (1) children with disabilities and their parents receive training and information designed to assist the children in meeting developmental and functional goals and challenging academic achievement goals, and in preparing to lead productive independent adult lives;
- (2) children with disabilities and their parents receive training and information on their rights, responsibilities, and protections under this title, in order to develop the skills necessary to cooperatively and effectively participate in planning and decision making relating to early intervention, educational, and transitional services;
- (3) parents, teachers, administrators, early intervention personnel, related services personnel, and transition personnel receive coordinated and accessible technical assistance and information to assist such personnel in improving early intervention, educational, and transitional services and results for children with disabilities and their families...

### **3.2.5 Section 671 (20 USC 1471) Parent Training and Information Centers.**

(a) Program Authorized.

(1) In general. The Secretary may award grants to, and enter into contracts and cooperative agreements with, parent organizations to support parent training and information centers to carry out activities under this section.

(2) Definition of parent organization. In this section, the term ‘parent organization’ means a private nonprofit organization (other than an institution of higher education) that...

(A) has a board of directors...

(i) the majority of whom are parents of children with disabilities ages birth through 26;

(ii) that includes...

(I) individuals working in the fields of special education, related services, and early interventions; and

(II) individuals with disabilities; and

(iii) the parent and professional members of which are broadly representative of the population to be served, including low-income parents and parents of limited English proficient children; and

(b) Required Activities. Each parent training and information center that receives assistance under this section shall...

(1) provide training and information that meets the needs of parents of children with disabilities living in the area served by the center, particularly underserved

parents and parents of children who may be inappropriately identified, to enable their children with disabilities to...

(A) meet developmental and functional goals that have been established for all children; and

(B) be prepared to lead productive independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible;

(2) serve the parents of infants, toddlers, and children with the full range of disabilities described in section 602 (3);

(3) ensure that the training and information provided meets the needs of low-income parents and parents of limited English proficient children;

(4) assist parents to...

(A) better understand the nature of their children's disabilities and their educational, developmental, and transitional needs;

(B) communicate effectively and work collaboratively with personnel responsible for providing special education, early intervention services, transition services, and related services;

(C) participate in decision making processes and the development of individualized education programs under part B and individualized family service plans under part C;

(D) obtain appropriate information about the range, type, and quality of...

(i) options, programs, services, technologies, practices and interventions based on scientifically based research, to the extent practicable; and

- (ii) resources available to assist children with disabilities and their families in school and at home;
- (E) understand the provisions of this title for the education of, and the provision of early intervention services to, children with disabilities;
- (F) participate in activities at the school level that benefit their children; and
- (G) participate in school reform activities;
- (5) in States where the State elects to contract with the parent training and information center, contract with State educational agencies to provide, consistent with subparagraphs (B) and (D) of section 615 (e) (2), individuals who meet with parents to explain the mediation process to the parents,
- (6) assist parents in resolving disputes in the most expeditious and effective way possible, including encouraging the use, and explaining the benefits, of alternate methods of dispute resolution, such as the mediation process described in section 615 (e);
- (7) assist parents and students with disabilities to understand their rights and responsibilities under this title, including those under section 615 (m) upon the student's reaching the age of majority (as appropriate under State law);
- (8) assist parents to understand the availability of, and how to effectively use, procedural safeguards under this title, including the resolution session described in section 615 (e);
- (9) assist parents in understanding, preparing for, and participating in, the process described in section 615 (f) (1) (B);



(10) establish cooperative partnerships with community parent resource centers founded under section 672;

### **3.2.6 Section 672 (20 USC 1472) Community Parent Resource Centers.**

(a) Program authorized.

(1) In general. The Secretary may award grants to, and enter into contracts and cooperative agreements with, local parent organizations to support community parent resource centers that will help ensure that underserved parents of children with disabilities, including low income parents, parents of limited English proficient children, and parents with disabilities, have the training and information the parents need to enable the parents to participate effectively in helping their children with disabilities...

(2) Definition of local parent organization. In this section, the term ‘local parent organization’ means a parent organization, as defined in section 671 (a) (2), that...

(A) has a board of directors the majority of whom are parents of children with disabilities ages birth through 26 from the community to be served; and

(B) has as its mission serving parents of children with disabilities who...

(i) are ages birth through 26; and

(ii) have the full range of disabilities described in section 602 (3).

(b) Required Activities. Each community parent resource center assisted under this section shall...

- (1) provide training and information that meets the training and information needs of parents of children with disabilities proposed to be served by the grant, contract, or cooperative agreement;
- (2) carry out the activities required of parent training and information centers under paragraphs (2) through (9) of section 671 (b);
- (3) establish cooperative partnerships with the parent training and information centers funded under section 671; and
- (4) be designed to meet the specific needs of families who experience significant isolation from available sources of information and support.

**3.2.7 Section 673 (20 USC 1473) Technical Assistance for Parent Training and Information Centers.**

(a) Program Authorized.

(1) In general. The Secretary may, directly or through awards to eligible entities, provide technical assistance for developing, assisting, and coordinating parent training and information programs carried out by parent training and information centers receiving assistance under section 671 and community parent resource centers receiving assistance under section 672.

(b) Authorized Activities. The Secretary may provide technical assistance to a parent training and information center or a community parent resource center under this section in areas such as...

- (1) effective coordination of parent training efforts;
- (2) dissemination of scientifically based research and information;

- (3) promotion of the use of technology, including assistive technology devices and assistive technology services;
  - (4) reaching underserved populations, including parents of low-income and limited English proficient children with disabilities;
  - (7) promotion of alternative methods of dispute resolution, including mediation.
- (c) Collaboration with the Resource Centers. Each eligible entity receiving an award under subsection (a) shall develop collaborative agreements with the geographically appropriate regional resource center and, as appropriate, the regional educational laboratory supported under section 174 of the Education Science Reform Act of 2002, to further parent and professional collaboration.

Sections 670, 671, 672, and 673 are paramount to ensuring parents the knowledge necessary to engage actively in the education of their children with disabilities. IDEIA (2004) re-emphasizes the state and federal responsibility to fund the necessary dissemination of information to parents of children with disabilities. Only through knowledge of the disability and its impact on learning can parents be full partners in the IEP process. Also, the systems created in sections 671, 672, and 673 allow parents to be instrumental in their own growth in understanding. The features found within these sections of the title demonstrate a high level of respect for parents. This degree of respect reinforces parents' sense of *role construction* and *efficacy* in the lives of their children with disabilities. Parents are able to come to the IEP process believing they have a role to play and the ability to make a difference in the developmental and functional lives of their children. School professionals, by their very actions in the IEP process, may reinforce or damage the perceptions of parents towards their rights and responsibilities (Fish, 2006, 2008).

Without training and information parents are unable to understand special education's complex legal foundation and the jargon utilized by education professionals. The lack of understanding causes parents to feel ill equipped to play a role in the education of their children with disabilities. Parents are held back from engaging in the decision-making process found in the IEP. Empirical evidence (Dabkowski, 2004; Fish, 2006, 2008) reveals parents' perceive some educators as taking advantage by commandeering the decision-making in the IEP process. Parents need educators to reinforce the knowledge they have gained through training. In order for educators to play this role school districts must promote positive collaboration and facilitate successful parent involvement through partnerships with parent training and information centers. Collaboration with parent training and information centers allows educators and parents to receive the same messages and construct compatible knowledge as a result. Parents are more apt to become actively involved when they are able to clearly communicate with the other members of the IEP team. Active involvement supports partnerships that develop IEPs that meet the expectations of all members of the IEP team.

Unfortunately, not all IEP teams reach the level necessary for partnerships to form. When partnerships do not form parents become alienated from the IEP process. Parents are unable to voice concerns for their children with disabilities and their educational programs. As discussed prior, section 615 of IDEIA (2004) provides the system parents must follow when they have educational concerns they are unable to resolve in the IEP process. This process is based on the significant due process rights of parents and children with disabilities. Parents have the right to a due process hearing if they are unable to reach agreement with the school district. A due process hearing has all the rights and privileges of a formal trial (i.e. the right to an attorney, subpoena rights, examination and cross-examination of witnesses, and examination of all

evidence). In the 37 years since the passage of P.L. 94-142 litigation has occurred on the local, state, and federal level when parents of children with disabilities and school districts disagree over the content of a student's special education services. The following relevant court cases have moved forward parental rights and responsibilities. The resulting strengthening of parental rights and responsibilities serve to reinforce and encourage family/school partnerships.

### **3.3 RELEVANT COURT CASES**

Parents' rights and responsibilities for the education of their children with disabilities have been reaffirmed through court rulings (Hurwitz, 2008; Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007; Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). Court rulings on IDEIA (2004), in all of its versions, have moved forward the concept of FAPE, procedural safeguards, parents' rights in decision-making, the IEP process, and due process rights (see Table 3). These decisions bolster the foundation for parental involvement in special education. As discussed in IDEIA (2004) section 615, parents have the right to a due process hearing when they have a disagreement with the special education and related services school districts are providing for their children with disabilities. Court rulings have strengthened the rights of parents to be meaningfully involved in the special education process (Yell et al., 2009). The following cases have been selected as they have significantly impacted those areas that are paramount to supporting the development of constructive parent/school partnerships for parents of children with disabilities.

### **3.3.1 Mills v. District of Columbia Board of Education, 348 F. Supp. 866 (1972).**

#### **3.3.1.1 Statement of facts:**

Mills v. Board of Education was a class action suit brought on behalf of seven school age children who were excluded from school by the District of Columbia School District. The students were deprived of access to the public schools due to being labeled as behavioral problems, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed or hyperactive. Each of the plaintiffs qualified as an exceptional student as defined by the law (IDEIA). While all of the students were African-American, the suit was brought on behalf of all school-age students who were eligible to receive FAPE, but were being excluded from public education.

#### **3.3.1.2 Issue:**

Did the School district deny students FAPE by excluding the students from school without a prior hearing and without a given periodic review? (Answered in the Affirmative). May a school district deny services based on an ability to afford said services? (Answered in the Negative).

#### **3.3.1.3 Decision:**

The District of Columbia School District is required by law to provide a publicly supported education for children deemed exceptional. The district's failure to provide FAPE by excluding these students from the school district or by not providing them with publicly supported education cannot be excused based on the district's claim of insufficient funds. Additionally, the school district was found to be in violation of the students and their parents' due process and periodic review rights. The court ruled that if necessary all students would need to bear the

burden of insufficient funds in a manner equitable to all students. Students could not be suspended from public schools for disciplinary reasons without due process protection. The ruling reiterated the rights of parents to be notified of any and all proposed actions of a school district concerning the providing of educational services to children with disabilities.

The school district would have to clearly state the reasons why they were proposing the actions and all data being used as a basis for the decision. Alternate educational opportunities would need to be made available to ensure students continued receiving of FAPE. Also, parents would need to be notified of their right to object to the proposed actions on the part of the school district. The school district would be responsible to inform the parents of the steps they would need to take in order to be heard before a hearing officer in a due process hearing. The school district would need to share with parents the child's right to receive, at no charge, an independent evaluation. The independent evaluation would be conducted at a federally or locally funded diagnostic center. Finally, school districts are required to inform parents of their right to be represented by legal counsel, to have full access to the student's school records, to provide evidence and to cross-examine all school officials or agents of the school district upon which the decision was made. Hearing times must be scheduled at the parents' convenience. The ruling reinforced the rights of parents of children with disabilities. These rights help to support the building of strong family/school partnerships for students with disabilities. As seen in this case and the following cases, case law has helped to define the roles of parents and the school districts in the providing of special education and related services supporting family/school partnerships.

**3.3.2 Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176 (1982).**

**3.3.2.1 Statement of facts:**

The case concerned a deaf student, Amy Rowland of the Furnace Woods School in the Hendrick Hudson Central School District in Peekskill, New York. Amy had minimal residual hearing and was an excellent lib reader. Amy was placed in a regular kindergarten class to determine what supplemental services she would need in order to receive benefit from her education. Also, several members of the school administration attended courses in sign language and a Teletype machine was installed to communicate with Amy's parents. After a short period a decision was made to provide Amy with an FM hearing aid to amplify the words spoken by the teacher or fellow classmates.

An IEP meeting was held and an IEP was prepared at the beginning of first grade. It was determined that Amy should continue to be educated in a regular classroom at Furnace Woods, should continue to use the FM hearing aid, should receive instruction from a tutor for the deaf, and should receive services from a speech therapist. Amy's parents requested that Amy be provided with a qualified sign-language interpreter in her academic classes. The school district had placed an interpreter into her kindergarten class for a two-week trial period. However, the interpreter had felt that Amy did not demonstrate a need for his services. Based on this trial period the school district concluded that Amy was not in need of an interpreter in her first-grade classroom and denied the parents' request.



### **3.3.2.2 Issue:**

Did the school district deny Amy FAPE by refusing to provide her with a qualified sign-language interpreter in all academic classes as requested by her parents? (Answered in the Negative). Does a school district need to provide a student with a related service if the student is making meaningful progress without said accommodation? (Answered in the Negative).

### **3.3.2.3 Decision:**

Supreme Court Justice Rehnquist delivered the majority opinion of the Court. The majority found the term ‘free, appropriate public education (FAPE)’ to mean special education and related services provided at no expense to the parents, under public supervision and direction, which met the standards of the state agency. Further, they found FAPE includes an appropriate preschool, elementary school, and secondary school education as provided by the state involved and in conformity to an individualized education program. The justices further argued Congress had intended primarily to make public education available to children with disabilities, not to require that services provided would render a maximum benefit to the student.

In this interpretation of congressional intent, Amy had received FAPE based on her identification, evaluation, and provision of a free appropriate education. Amy’s receipt of personalized services with sufficient support services permitted her to benefit educationally from the instruction. The court determined Amy was receiving an adequate education since she was performing better than the average students in her class and was advancing from grade to grade. To mandate the services of an interpreter would in essence provide Amy with services that went beyond the scope or intent of the law. The majority argued that the provision of an interpreter would maximize Amy’s services beyond any reasonable scope in comparison to her non-disabled

peers. The Court further found that the IEP and the foregoing personalized instruction must be created according to the requirements of the Act.

In this case the importance Congress placed on procedural safeguards is upheld through the acknowledgement that Amy was receiving an adequate education as determined by her performing better than the average child and her progression from grade to grade. The Court recognized the importance Congress placed upon ensuring parents a large measure of participation at every stage of the administrative process. Amy's parents were fully involved in the development of the IEP. Once again the intent of the law to ensure the rights of parents to engage as full partners with the school district in the education of their children with disabilities was articulated by the Court.

### **3.3.3 School Committee of the Town of Burlington, Massachusetts, Et al. v. Department of Education of Massachusetts Et al., 471 U.S. 359 (1985).**

#### **3.3.3.1 Statement of facts:**

The case concerned a first grader, Michael Panico, in the public school district of Burlington, Massachusetts. Michael was the son of Robert Panico. While in the first grade, Michael began experiencing difficulties in school and was found to have a specific learning disability. Michael was determined to be exceptional and granted special education services through an IEP. In third grade Michael received individual tutoring with a reading specialist and group counseling. The school Michael was attending ended at third grade. The parents and school district entered into discussions on where Michael should attend fourth grade. Also, the parents and school district disagreed over the reason behind Michael's learning difficulties. The school district believed

Michael's learning problems arose out of emotional difficulties and his parents believed it to be neurological in nature.

The school district presented the parents with a proposed IEP for the 1979-1980 school year. The school district proposed a school placement in a highly structured class containing six students with special academic and social needs located in another school building in the district. Michael's father rejected the proposed IEP and sought to implement due process rights. The hearing was initially cancelled when the parent and school district agreed to mediation. However, medication efforts proved to be unsuccessful. The parents received a private evaluation at this time from specialists at the Massachusetts General Hospital. The report emphasized that Michael's emotional difficulties were secondary to his very severe learning disability. The specialists' recommended a highly specialized setting for children with severe learning disabilities, such as the Carroll School in Lincoln, Massachusetts for Michael.

Michael's father decided to enroll Michael in the Carroll School in the fall of 1979, as he believed that the school recommended by the school district was inadequate to meet Michael's needs. Mr. Panico paid the tuition at the time of enrollment. Several hearings were held at the local level throughout the fall and spring of the 1979-1980 school year. The hearing officer decided the school district's proposed placement was inappropriate and Michael's placement at the Carroll School was the least restrictive placement appropriate for Michael. The school district was ordered to reimburse Michael's tuition and transportation costs for the 1979-1980 school year. The case was eventually appealed to the Supreme Court.

#### **3.3.3.2 Issue:**

Did the parent's violation of 20 U.S.C. Section 1415 (e) (3) (Education for All Handicapped Children's Act) by placing their child with a disability in a private school without the consent of

a local school authority during the pendency process constitute a waiver of the parent's right to reimbursement for expenses incurred for the private placement. (Answered in the Negative). Did the Court have the power to order school districts to reimburse parents for their expenditures on private special education for the child if the court ultimately decided that such placement, rather than the proposed IEP, is proper under the Act? (Answered in the Affirmative).

### **3.3.3.3 Decision:**

Judge Rehnquist delivered the opinion for a unanimous Supreme Court. The Court found the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act requires the participating states and local school districts to ensure procedural safeguards for the provision of FAPE to parents and their children with disabilities. Procedural safeguards include the rights of parents to be active participants in the formation of their child's IEP. Also, procedural safeguards include the rights of those parents to challenge in administrative and court proceedings a proposed IEP with which they disagree. Further, due to the length of time a court action may take the court deemed to address the important questions of interim placement and financial responsibility for placement.

The Supreme Court considered the question of placement and financial responsibility in light of the power of judicial review conferred on the court by the Act. The Education for All Handicapped Children's Act provides for judicial review in state and federal court for any party aggrieved by the findings and decision made in a due process hearing. The Act allows the court to review all records and any additional evidence at the request of either party. The Act also provides the court the discretion of granting relief as the court finds appropriate. The Court ruled that appropriate would include directing a public school to implement an IEP placing a child in a private placement when the court has determined that the private placement is the proper placement rather than the placement determined in the IEP. However, the Court further ruled

that this would be an empty victory for the family if the child had been denied the appropriate placement throughout the course of judicial review. Unfortunately judicial review is a timely process and parents should not be forced to go along with an IEP they believe to be detrimental to the development of their child. By refusing parents an opportunity to recoup the financial costs based on the premise that violating pendency negates their rights would in essence limit their full participation in developing a proper IEP, procedural safeguards, and a child's right to FAPE.

Without the ability to receive reimbursement, parents would be forced to make decisions based on financial concerns. The Court ruled it is only logical that parents with the financial means to send their children to the placement they feel appropriate should be able to recoup the expenditure if they are ultimately successful in the judicial process.

**3.3.4 Brian Schaffer, a Minor, By His Parents and Next Friends, Jocelyn and Martin Schaffer, Et al., Petitioners v. Jerry Weast, Superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools, Et al., 546 U.S. 49 (2005).**

**3.3.4.1 Statement of Facts:**

The case concerned the educational services due to Brian Schaffer, a child with a learning disability and speech-language impairment. Brian attended private schooling from kindergarten to seventh grade. The officials of the school informed Brian's parents in seventh grade that he needed a school better able to accommodate his needs. Brian's parents then contacted their school district, Montgomery County Public Schools. Montgomery County Public Schools evaluated Brian and scheduled an IEP team meeting. The school district offered Brian placement in either of two schools in the district. Brian's parents did not approve of either

placement and enrolled Brian in another private school. The parents subsequently initiated a due process hearing to challenge the appropriateness of Brian's IEP and compensation for the private placement.

The administrative judge charged by Maryland law to hear IEP hearings found for the school district. The court further ruled the burden of persuasion was on the parents. The parents brought a civil suit to challenge the ruling. The parents and the school district reached an agreement on placement, but the suit continued due to the parents' request for compensation of the private school tuition.

#### **3.3.4.2 Issue:**

Did the burden of persuasion rest upon the party seeking relief in a due process hearing and subsequent court matters when assessing the appropriateness of an IEP? (Answered in the Affirmative).

#### **3.3.4.3 Decision:**

The Court ruled the core of the Act is the cooperative process established between parents and the school district. Once again the Court emphasized the importance the Act placed on compliance with procedures in order to ensure parents' rights to participation. The IEP process serves as the vehicle for parent/school participation for children with disabilities. School districts must conform to the standards set forth in the law, i.e. identify and evaluate a child with disabilities, develop an IEP based on the assessments of the child, and specify the services that will be provided. Additionally, parents must be informed and consent must be obtained for evaluations of a child. Parents also have a right to independent assessments paid for by the school district if they disagree with the school districts findings. Written prior notice of a school

district's decision to make a change in an IEP must be given to parents. Parents may seek a due process hearing if they believe an IEP for their child is inappropriate. Due to the protections afforded parents, the Court turned to the default rule to resolve the legal issue of the case.

The Act does not clearly state which party holds the burden of proof in hearings concerning the rights of students with disabilities. The Court turned to the default rule that plaintiffs bear the burden of proving their claims. The default rule rests on the concept that the person who seeks court action should be able to fully justify the request. Arguments urging the Court to place the burden always on the school district were rejected. The Court argued parents and their children with disabilities are protected through procedural safeguards. Hence the burden of proof in an IEP challenge should be placed on the party seeking relief. If a school district called an IEP into question then the school district would hold the burden of proof. In this case Brian and Brian's parent called the IEP into question and so held the burden of proof.

**3.3.5 Jacob Winkelman, a minor, By and Through His Parents and Legal Guardians, Jeff and Sandee Winkelman, Et al., v. Parma City School District, 550 U.S. 516 (2007).**

**3.3.5.1 Statement of Facts:**

Jeff and Sandee Winkelman had entered into due process on behalf of their son Jacob Winkelman. Jacob had autism spectrum disorder and was covered under IDEIA (2004). Jacob's parents worked with the school district to create an IEP for Jacob. The parents and the school district were unable to come to terms on the IEP for the 2003-2004 school year. The school district proposed placement in a public school, which the Winkelman's believed to be inadequate to provide Jacob with a free, appropriate public education. The parents proceeded to place Jacob in a private school at their own expense. Also, the parents filed a complaint under the

administrative review process found in IDEIA (2004). The parents filed a federal complaint and later the appeal without the use of an attorney.

#### **3.3.5.2 Issue:**

May parents who are untrained or licensed as counsels proceed in court on behalf of their children or themselves when they are dissatisfied with the outcome of a due process hearing? (Answered in the Affirmative). Did the provisions of IDEIA accord to parents' rights of their own that can be vindicated in court proceedings? (Answered in the Affirmative). Did the Act allow parents in their status as parents the right to represent their child in a court proceeding? (Answered in the Affirmative).

#### **3.3.5.3 Decision:**

The Supreme Court argued parents have the status of real parties in interest based on the totality of IDEIA (2004). As parties of interest parents are able to represent themselves in federal court without the aid of counsel pursuant to the law. Also, the Court ruled four areas of IDEIA (2004) were relevant to the Winkelman's claim, i.e. the procedures mandated for the development of a child's IEP, criteria determining the sufficiency of FAPE, the mechanisms available for objections to an IEP or other aspects of proceedings, and reimbursement of parents for various expenses under certain circumstances. The Court argued that these various provisions grant to parents independent, enforceable rights under IDEIA (2004). The parents' independent rights are not only in the procedures and costs of the process, but also in the substantive rights. The Court reiterated Congress's finding that the education of children with disabilities is enhanced by the involvement of the parents. This belief is clearly articulated in IDEIA (2004) in the



strengthening of the role and responsibility of parents, as well as ensuring parents have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children.

### **3.3.6 Summary of Relevant Court Cases**

The rulings of the State and Federal Court systems are principal to parental participation in special education. Through the stated court rulings found above the definition of FAPE has been expanded to include the parents of a child with special needs (Yell et al., 2009). The court has ruled that IDEIA (2004) mandates parental involvement, hence extending enforceable rights under the law to parents. Further, the court has ruled parental participation is essential in guaranteeing a child with special needs FAPE. To accomplish the provision of FAPE through parental participation, IDEIA (2004) reinforces the rights of parental involvement in the IEP process (Yet et al., 2009). The Supreme Court ruled, “that barring parents of the right to represent their children in IDEA-related cases in the federal courts would be inconsistent with the intent of the IDEIA” (Yell et al., 2009, p. 72). This ruling reinforces the central purpose of IDEIA to facilitate the provision of FAPE to children with disabilities through the involvement of their parents in the IEP process.

The previously discussed cases inform the rights of parents and their children with disabilities. The clarification of parental and student rights helps to define parent/school partnerships. The court decisions entail due process rights and procedures, independent evaluations, representation by council, acting in place of council, full access to student records, and the burden of persuasion. Parents have a right to object to placement. School districts are responsible to ensure parents know this right, as well as the processes parents must follow to invoke this right. If a school district proposes a change to an IEP they must clearly state why

they are proposing the action. Parents must be given access to the data and all school records upon which decisions are made for their children with disabilities. If parents disagree with the evaluations conducted by the school district they have a right to receive at no charge an independent evaluation. Furthermore, a free, appropriate public education must be provided for the student with disabilities at no cost to the parents. The IEP process in full accordance with state standards serves as the mechanism that ensures a student FAPE.

Parents are full partners in the construction and implementation of the IEP as re-emphasized in the decisions set out in the previously discussed cases. Parent participation must be insured at every stage of the administrative process to guarantee procedural safeguards. The Court ruled the burden of persuasion in the challenging of an IEP falls to the party seeking relief. If parents challenge the IEP they are responsible to prove their case. Conversely, if the school district challenges the school district is responsible for the burden of proof. Further, the Court ruled parents have the status of real parties in interest with independent, enforceable rights under IDEIA (2004). The major psychological factors motivating parental involvement, *role construction*, *self-efficacy*, and *invitation to involvement*, have been positively reinforced through the previously discussed court rulings. These rulings have supported parents' rights to be involved (*role construction*), spoke to the importance of parental input (*self-efficacy*), and the school's obligation to include parents in the process of educating their children with disabilities (*invitation to involvement*). The complex interaction of legislation, court rulings, and education has supported the formation of constructive parent/school partnerships. The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education also speaks to parents' role in the education of their children with disabilities.

**Table 3. Progression of Case Law in Education/Special Education**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Case</b>	<b>Complaint</b>	<b>Finding</b>
1954	Brown v. Board of Education	African-American students refused registration in neighborhood schools	Doctrine of separate but equal is found unconstitutional.
1967	Hobson v. Hansen	Objection to use of standardized testing for tracking purposes.	Tracking system abolished in Washington, D.C. school system. Special classes, however, were allowed provided that testing procedures were rigorous and retesting was frequent.
1970	Diana v. State Board of Education.	Objection to use of IQ testing in non-native language.	IQ testing must occur in native language, culturally unfair items had to be eliminated in assessment testing, and if IQ tests were to be used, they had to be developed to reflect Mexican American culture.
1972	Mills v. Board of Education	Exclusion from school based on behavior.	Set forth future guidelines for federal legislation, including: rights of students with disabilities to have access to a free public education, due process protection, and a mandated requirement to provide special education services regardless of the school district's financial capacity.
1972	Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Pennsylvania	Exclusion from a classroom based on having a disability.	Children must be educated in the least restrictive environment and included with their nondisabled peers as much as possible.
1974	Lau v. Nichols	Objection to instruction occurring not in student's native language.	Required supplemental English or instruction in native language.
1979	Larry P. v. Riles	Over-representation of African-American children in classes for the mentally retarded.	IQ testing was restricted and restructured by the Court. The Court determined that IQ testing was discriminatory against African Americans in three ways: IQ tests measure achievement rather than ability; IQ tests rest on the assumption that intelligence is distributed in the population in

			accordance with a normal statistical curve, and so the tests are an artificial tool to rank individuals; IQ tests lead to the classification of more African American students than white students in dead-end classes for students with mild to moderate disabilities.
1979	Armstrong v. Kline	Parents of 5 students with severe disabilities claimed that their children regressed during school breaks.	Services must be extended through recess periods of the school year if a negative or regressive effect would occur otherwise.
1980	Parents in Action on Special Education (PASE) v. Hannon	Cultural bias of IQ test instruments.	Questions on IQ test were found to not be culturally biased. Case did not become historically significant as Illinois banned IQ testing of African American children as part of the settlement.
1980	Battle v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Companion appellate case to Armstrong)	Termination of related services at the end of each school year for summer recess.	Services must be extended through recess periods of the school year if a negative or regressive effect would occur otherwise.
1982	Board of Ed. of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Amy Rowley	Deaf student who was meeting the goals of her IEP requested an interpreter.	Since the student was benefitting from her program, the program was appropriate and the student was receiving FAPE.
1984	Debra P. v. Turlington	Requirement of high school competency testing for graduation.	Students must be adequately informed of the testing before enforcement of the requirement can occur.
1984	Irving Independent School District v. Tatro	Parents requested a school district provide their child with clean, intermittent catheterization during school hours.	CIC qualifies as a related service. The Ct. ruled the school must provide these services under special education law in order for student to receive FAPE.
1985	Burlington Sch. Committee v. Mass. Bd. of Ed.	Parent challenged the appropriateness of a child's IEP. Father, at own expense, enrolled child in a state-approved private school for special education.	Clarified procedural safeguards, parent role in educational decision-making, tuition reimbursement for private placement, child's placement during dispute about FAPE. Parent was not reimbursed as the IEP was deemed appropriate.

1988	Honig v. Doe	Two ED students were suspended indefinitely for violent and disruptive conduct related to their disability. Doe's parents sued the school district.	Clarified procedural issues for school officials, parent role, stay put, schools cannot expel children for behaviors related to their disability.
1989	Timothy W. v. Rochester	Severity of the disability made the child uneducable.	Upheld the right to a free and appropriate education no matter the disability.
1989	Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education	School district refused to place child in a class with nondisabled peers.	Set forth procedures designed to ensure each child's education meets the requirements of IDEA and is in the least restrictive environment possible.
1993	Florence Co. Sch. Dist. Four v. Shannon Carter	Parents' challenged the appropriateness of child's IEP and enrolled her in private school while case was pending. Requested tuition reimbursement.	Parents are entitled to reimbursement when they place their child in a private program, which is appropriate if the public school does not provide an appropriate education.
1994	Sacramento City Board of Education v. Rachael H.	Parents sought to increase time child spent in a regular classroom.	Court declared that the starting point in placement decisions must be in the mainstream. Also the court established a four part-balancing test to determine if districts are complying with IDEA.
1999	Cedar Rapids Comm. Sch. Dist. v. Garret F. and Charlene F.	School district declined to accept financial responsibility for health care services that Garret required during the school day.	Affirmed the provision of related services to children who need the services in order to attend school.
2004	N.B. v. Warwick School Committee	Parents wanted a different program then the one in place in the IEP.	The school did not have to provide the requested program as they were providing a program with a reasonable prediction of success.
2005	Schaffer v. Weast	Which party has the burden of persuasion in a due process hearing?	The burden of persuasion for due process hearings should be placed on whichever party is seeking relief.
2006	Arlington Central School District Board of Education v. Murphy	Parents of a child with a disability sought reimbursement for fees for services rendered by an educational consultant during a legal proceeding for a placement disagreement.	IDEA does not allow reimbursement for expert's fees because only attorney's fees are mentioned in the language of the law.

2007	Jacob Winkelman v. Parma City School District	Lower court argued IDEA does not grant parents the right to represent their child in federal court because the FAPE mandate only grants rights to the child and not to the parents.	Expanded the definition of FAPE by ruling that IDEA mandates parental involvement, parents have enforceable rights under the law, and parental participation in special education is crucial to ensuring children with disabilities receive a FAPE.
2009	Forest Grove v. T.D.	Tuition reimbursement for a private school when a student has never enrolled in a public school as the district would not have the opportunity to provide appropriate services.	Concluded that IDEA authorizes reimbursement of the cost of private special education services when a district fails to provide FAPE and the private school placement is appropriate, regardless of whether the child had previously received special education or related services through the public school.

### **3.4 THE PRESIDENT’S COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

On October 2, 2001, President George W. Bush created a commission to make recommendations to reform and improve special education services in the United States. The President desired a means to align the civil rights and legal protections found in the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) with the accountability measures found in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The commission held an open dialogue with parents, teachers, and community organizations in order to gain insight into the learning needs of children with disabilities. The report submitted by the commission provided a framework for improving all areas of special education including accountability, flexibility, and parental empowerment (PCESE, 2002). The President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education report, *A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and their Families* (2002) found parental involvement to be essential to the concept of excellence in education for children with disabilities.

The President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (PCESE, 2002) reported parents are the key to success for students with disabilities. The commissioners and expert witnesses repeatedly stressed the importance of parents in the education of children with special needs (PCESE, 2002). The report emphasized the need to develop programs promoting parents’ understanding of their rights and educational services under the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act (IDEIA, 2004). This need rests on the premise that parents must develop the ability to become effectively engaged in the decision-making process for their children.

According to the Commissioners “parents need access to meaningful information about their children, measures of adequate yearly progress and how assessment serves as a diagnostic

tool that measures not only a child's strengths and weaknesses, but also their yearly progress" in order for parents to make informed decisions (PCESE, 2002, p. 38). This decision-making process in special education is the foundation for parents' involvement as affirmed in IDEIA (2004). However, further compounding the decision-making stress for parents is the recommendation by IDEIA (2004) to establish higher standards of productivity for students with disabilities. This recommendation is based on the findings that students with disabilities drop out at twice the rate of their peers and are 50% less likely to go on to higher education (PCESE, 2002). Due to these recommendations, parents will have to lend even greater support in order for their children to reach success. This call for more active parental participation increases the need to understand the legal underpinnings of parental involvement in special education. Within special education, federal policy and case law defines the role of parent involvement through mandates of rights and responsibilities (IDEIA, 2004).

### **3.5 SUMMARY OF FAMILY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW.**

The progression of federal and state laws mandate active parent participation in all aspects of the educational life of children receiving special education services. IDEIA (2004) emphasizes the need to develop programming to support parents' understanding of their rights and responsibilities under the law. Without access to meaningful information or an understanding of their role within the education of their children, parents will not be able to participate to the degree needed to ensure greater outcomes for this segment of the student body. Parent participation becomes limited at the very time it is of utmost importance for the success of



children receiving special education services. The more families feel they must turn to due process in order to protect the educational rights of their children, the more adversarial the relationship between family and school becomes.

While the courts have moved the rights of children with disabilities forward, it is by no means the best approach to negotiating relationships between families and education professionals. Each court case causes refinements to the law during periods of reauthorization, which result in greater mandates for parents and school districts. IDEIA (2004) in its latest version places significant restrictions and expectations on the part of parents and educators. These restrictions and expectations have the potential to further frame an adversarial relationship. Adversarial relationships then stand in the way of building the equal partnership that is of paramount importance in the IEP process (Dabkowski, 2004; Fish, 2006, 2008). If we look at the relationship of parents and educators from the perspective of bio-ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2005) we realize that the relationship is developmental in nature. As education professionals move forward with parents of children receiving special education services, they need to be aware that it is never too late to create healthy, productive relationships.

The IEP process has the ability to be the space where parents and schools come together. The relationships developed in this process can impact parents in a positive manner that serves as a foundation for active participation in decision-making and parental participation in all aspects of children's education. Parents who are *invited* into the process from the beginning through the setting of meeting dates in a truly collaborative manner to having their thoughts and ideas heard, respected, and utilized in the IEP document are much more likely to embrace a family/school partnership. Parents will develop a stronger sense of *efficacy* when they are treated as valued

members of the IEP team. Also, an educator communicating in a clear manner that solicits parental input reinforces feelings of *efficacy*, *role construction*, and *invitation* to involvement. Ultimately, the children will benefit by receiving appropriate services developed through a true collaborative process. Parents will feel welcomed and respected furthering their connection to their children's learning and school. Trust will develop between parents and education professionals increasing the parents' ability to accept educator input in the programming for their children. Educators who listen openly to parents will create a better program that truly meets the needs of students. The links between the settings of home and school would be such that healthy development becomes the most likely outcome (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2005; Patrikakou et al., 2005). With such an outcome the bridge that connects students' home, school, and community becomes stronger to the benefit of all concerned (Epstein, 2001a).

## **4.0 METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents the research methodology used for examining the perceptions of parents with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) towards family/school partnerships. Further, the chapter describes the qualitative research paradigm, the case study approach utilized, the rationale for the selected approach, and the research questions which guided the study. A description of the research setting, selection of participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, and verification procedures is discussed. Moreover, as the researcher I share my personal story as it applies to its influence on the nature of the research.

### **4.1 MEANS OF INQUIRY**

#### **4.1.1 Qualitative Research Method and the Constructivist Paradigm**

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) portrayed “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). Qualitative research takes place in the real world, allowing the researcher to make sense of a phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to the situation (Mertens, 2005). Further, qualitative research involves the collection of empirical data that helps to bring clarity to the events of everyday life. This research design fits with my personal belief in the

constructivist view as defined by Lincoln and Guba (2000). Lincoln and Guba (2000) articulated the constructivist belief that “a goodly portion of social phenomena consists of the meaning-making activities of groups and individuals around those phenomena” (p. 167). In light of this view, I assume that parents make meaning of their personal roles in the formal education of their children and the formation of a relationship with their child’s school system. Qualitative research has allowed me to share the parents’ perceptions through understanding the cultural values, school practices, and personal interactions the parents encountered in family/school partnerships.

The meaning-making activities of parents of children with ASD in family/school partnerships were of great interest as they guided and shaped parents’ action and inaction. Coming to know the reality constructed by parents allowed me to piece together the complex notions of why parents become actively involved in the education of their children (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This knowledge then allowed for the development of suggested professional interventions that were responsive to the motivational interpretations held by parents (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995). In order to reach this level of understanding the research questions evolved as I interacted with the parents. In addition, the perceptions of a variety of parents were sought in order to construct a fuller interpretation. This variety of parents served to refine the research questions. Allowing the questions to arise out of the interaction brought a richer understanding into parental motivation for involvement. Qualitative research allowed for this shifting view, which occurred as the researcher came to terms with the phenomenon being studied.

Furthermore, the constructivist paradigm assumes the researcher and the participants of the research are interlocked, each affecting the other’s construct of reality (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995). As a qualitative researcher and a parent of a child with autism I accept my

inability to remove myself completely from the research process. A more interactive, personally involved style allowed me to acknowledge my own life experiences and the impact on notions of objectivity. Moreover, I was able to deal with the concepts I had already developed as I made sense of my own experiences. My history, as well as my social networks borne of my personal experience with autism, served as the foundation of the scheme I had invented to make sense of my experiences. Parent groups in autism served as a backdrop to my life story. In parent groups we shared a common set of experiences, understandings, practices, and language. We continually tested and modified our understandings, our constructions in light of what became a new experience when we interacted with one another (Schwandt, 2000). Framing the qualitative study around parents who were in a support group and were dealing with the issues of family/school partnerships allowed for understanding the constructions the parents had formed in that context.

Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) revealed the importance of qualitative research in exploring the attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of children, parents, and professionals involved in special education. Qualitative research supports questions of “what is happening?” and “how is it happening?” in the context of the phenomenon (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 196). The nature of the research was such that the research questions lent themselves to a qualitative research paradigm. Utilizing qualitative research allowed for seeking answers to how parents dealing with special education created and gave meaning to their experiences in family/school partnerships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Also, the qualitative research method supports the understanding of parents’ perceptions in light of the legal mandate requiring parents of children with disabilities to partner with school professionals in the decision-making process of special education. The legal mandate increased our need to understand how parents

experienced the process, a strong basis for selecting a qualitative method to frame this study. There are many different methods or strategies of inquiry for qualitative research in education (Mertens, 2005). Case study is one such strategy of inquiry that fits into qualitative research. Case study also fits the paradigm of understanding the perceptions of parents with children with ASD towards family/school partnerships.

#### **4.1.2 Strategy of Inquiry: Case Study**

According to Stake (2000) “case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used” (p. 435). Case study is the exploration of a bounded system, which may be simple or complex (Stake, 2000). A bounded system may be a child, a classroom of children, parents, an event, a setting, phenomenon, or process (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Stake, 2000). To determine whether the research of interest can be considered a case study, Stake (2000) argues, “its behavior is patterned” (p. 436). Certain features will be found in the system being studied while other features will remain outside. The case researcher will be able to specify the case based on the boundedness and the behavior patterns. The population for this case study was identified as parents of children with ASD who were classified in their school districts as students with disabilities. The parents had interactions with the school districts based on the classification of their children. Hence, the parents were a specific, unique, bounded system allowing for the study to be deemed a case study.

The study was conducted to understand the perceptions parents developed as they interacted with their children’s schools. As Stake (2000) constructed an understanding of case study to share with the reader, he identified three types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case study. Instrumental case study supports the examination of a particular case to

provide insight into an issue or to redefine a generalization. In instrumental case study, the case facilitates a deeper understanding of parents' perceptions towards family/school partnerships in the realm of special education. Utilizing this approach supported better understanding and theorizing on the perceptions parents formed as they partnered with the school for the benefit of their children.

Analyzing Stake's (1995, 2000) concepts of intrinsic and instrumental case study resulted in the realization that this study could fit either concept based on the motivation of the researcher. Intrinsic case studies provide better understanding of a specific case. In this situation the case is not undertaken because it represents other cases or because it exemplifies a particular trait or problem but because the case in and of itself is of interest. It could be argued the parent support group is of itself a case of interest and the time spent teasing out the particular stories of the participants was the motivation behind the study. However, it was my desire to come to understand the abstract construct of the perception of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnership through the parents' stories. The purpose of the study was to provide insight into the issue of family/school partnership in light of providing services for students categorized in special education due to ASD.

Stake (1995, 2000) defines instrumental case study as the providing of insight into an issue or attempting to recast a generalization. For me the case of the parent support group was of secondary interest with the primary interest being the issue of how parents of students with ASD perceive family/school partnerships. The parent support group played a supporting role in my understanding of the parents' perceptions and allowed for the understanding of the motivations and barriers that impacted the relationships that emerged from parental participation. Moreover, the parent support group facilitated the understanding of the roles the parents believed they had

in the educational lives of their children. As Stake (1995, 2000) reiterated, the case was still analyzed in depth in order to allow me to pursue understanding of the parallel interest of parents' perceptions towards family/school partnerships and their membership in the parent support group. The selection of the parent support group was done in order to advance the understanding of the perception of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships. In this case there was no line distinguishing intrinsic case study from instrumental, as the interests paralleled one another for the researcher. There existed only a "zone of combined purpose" separating intrinsic case study from instrumental in this study (Stake, 2000, p. 437). Ultimately the purpose of the study for the researcher resulted in the classification of the case study as an instrumental rather than an intrinsic case study.

#### **4.1.3 Study of the Particular and Generalizability**

The design of the case study favored the search of the particularity over the search for the generalizability of the case. I collected data in the hope to learn all there was to know about the single case (Stake, 2000). The focus allowed for the understanding of the atypical features, happenings, relationships, and situations of the one case. However, this focus also took time away from the study of the generalizable. As most researchers were supportive of the case study method only so far as its generalizability to other cases, Stake (2000) argued that case study method "has been too little honored as the intrinsic study of a valued particular...Generalizability should not be emphasized in all research" (p. 439). Nevertheless, in this study generalizability was reached through the describing of the case in such detail as to allow the reader to experience the happenings and draw conclusions from the richness of the data.



The complexity of the case study existed within the parents and their interactions with the educational process. The parents of the children with ASD were influenced by the contexts and situations, which they found themselves a part of due to their children's disabilities (Stake, 2000). The qualitative case study shed light on whether the parents of the students with ASD needed to feel invited into the special education process by the school's professionals. In addition, understanding arose concerning whether parents perceived that they played a vital part in the crafting of a document that served the needs of their children. The study supported understanding of parents' perception of their right to an active role in the education of their children with ASD. The elements of role construction were entwined with cultural beliefs of how the role should be performed. The parents of the children with ASD joined a parent support group that influenced their perception of role construction. Bronfenbrenner (1992) reminded us that human development is a set of processes where the elements of the person and the person's environment interact to produce the constancy and change that occurs over time. This understanding led us to acknowledge parents' role construction formed as an extension of all their interactions: with school professionals, members of support groups, and their community. This assumption was kept in mind during the analysis of the data.

In addition, a sense of parental efficacy (i.e., a belief in their ability to make a difference in their children's educational life) served as a finding of the case. A qualitative case study revealed that parents of children with ASD analyzed their ability to make a difference and became involved based on the outcome of that analysis. Furthermore, interpretations were reached concerning whether the goals the parents created aligned with their beliefs in their capacity to produce the desired outcome. Parents held back from full involvement in the special education process when they believed they were incapable of making a difference. The parents'

sense of efficacy changed as a result of interactions with educational professionals. This knowledge arose out of the contexts and situations of the case study, allowing for a full examination of the perceptions of parents of children with ASD towards family/school partnerships. In addition, this allowed for the case study to be formed around a small number of research questions leading to the thematic lines of the study (Stake, 2000).

## **4.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND THE RESEARCH PURPOSE**

### **4.2.1 Research Questions**

Case study method allowed for the in-depth interpretation that was necessary for the research question that framed this study. In this case study the research question concerned how parents of students classified with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) perceive family/school partnerships. This research question allowed for the gaining of understanding of the nature of the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, the sub-questions attempted to be descriptive as well as explanatory. Descriptive questions dealt with the “what” of the phenomena of parents’ perceptions. The explanatory questions helped with understanding the “why” that arose out of the perceptions (Boeije, 2010). To further guide and enlighten the course of the study the following sub-questions were utilized:

1. In what ways do parents of students classified with ASD describe the motivators for their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?
2. What barriers do parents of students classified with ASD believe they encounter in their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?

3. How do parents of students classified with ASD describe the relationships that arise out of their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?
4. What roles do parents believe they have in the educational lives of their children with ASD?

#### **4.2.2 Research Purpose**

Research may serve to describe a phenomenon or it may go beyond description to reach understanding or explanation (Boeije, 2010). While it was a desire to describe what the parents said they thought and believed about their interactions and partnerships with their school districts, it was of greater desire to comprehend the why. The reasons behind parents' perceptions would facilitate the creation of effective policy for developing stronger family/school partnerships for students receiving special education services. However, building a full description of the case was instrumental in coming to a clear explanation. Understanding the existing theories applicable to the phenomenon was a necessary piece of building the description towards an explanation. The literature review discussed several theories that apply to the phenomenon of family/school partnerships.

As we saw in Bronfenbrenner's (1992) bio-ecological theory of human development a person is centered in the changing properties of his or her immediate settings. The parents were centered in the multiple settings of their children's ASD, their children's educational needs, interactions with educational professionals, their cultural groups, the beliefs in the roles they played, as well as all other settings they found themselves within. Another valid theory was Epstein's (2001d) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Epstein's theory was built on the life-course perspective integrating useful strains of the different theories of family/school

relations. Epstein's (2001) theory revolved around the basic tenet found in bio-ecological theory that was families' change as time goes by, as they develop new skills and knowledge, as they interact with all the contexts of their environment. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) built upon bio-ecological theory and overlapping spheres of influence to determine what motivated parents of students in general education to engage in family/school partnerships.

This study was built around the desire to understand the perceptions of parents with children categorized with ASD towards family/school partnerships. The research was designed to investigate if parents of children with ASD are motivated towards school partnerships in a similar manner as parents of children in general education (i.e., role construction, parental efficacy, invitation to involvement, and life contexts). Further, the research was designed to grasp how these psychological concepts play out in light of the principles of special education. The gaining of this knowledge was instrumental in predicting and directing behavior in a manner to build successful family/school partnerships. The need for successful family/school partnerships in order to increase proficient cognitive development and academic success was seen throughout the literature review (Christenson, 2004; Coots, 1998; Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001). So a study focused on the perceptions of parents of children with ASD towards their interactions with educational professionals was of paramount importance.

The purpose of this case study was to understand the perceptions concerning family/school partnerships of parents of children classified with ASD. At this stage in the research, family/school partnerships were generally defined (see full definition in Chapter 1) as a principle of IDEIA (2004), which "promotes partnership but cannot compel it" (Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007, p. 291). Family/school partnerships consisted of the seven principles of communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, equality, advocacy, and trust.

Parents by law have the rights and the responsibility to form partnerships with educational professionals to engage in the decision-making process for classified students.

### **4.3 PROPOSITIONS FOR THE CASE STUDY**

Case studies lend themselves to the formation of propositions of why researchers believe they might observe a specific behavior or relationship (Mertens, 2005). The following propositions helped to narrow the scope of the research. These propositions emerged from the literature review:

Proposition 1: Parents have interactions with school districts depending on their children's classification under special education.

Proposition 2: Parents know they have rights and responsibilities as an extension of their children's classification under special education.

Proposition 3: Parents of children with ASD are influenced by the context and situations they find themselves in due to their children's disability.

Proposition 4: Parents feel invited into the process depending on the behavior of the educational professionals.

Proposition 5: Parents believe they bring important knowledge and understanding to the special education process.

Proposition 6: Parents believe they play a vital role in the IEP process for their children.

Proposition 7: Parents believe they are the best advocates for their children.

Proposition 8: Parents believe their primary role is to support the highest level of development for their children with disabilities.

Proposition 9: Parents believe in their ability to make a difference in their children's educational life.

Proposition 10: Parents become more involved when they believe their involvement makes a difference.

Proposition 11: Parents become more involved in the school when they believe their involvement is making a difference.

Proposition 12: Parents of children with disabilities apportion their time amongst the many services that facilitate their child's development (i.e., school services, community based services, and medical services).

#### **4.4 PARTICIPANTS**

Case study requires the researcher to select cases, which maximize what can be learned (Stake, 1995). In this study the population of the case was parents of children with ASD. In order to build understanding of parents' perceptions, it was necessary to choose the case well (Stake, 2000). Knowing that I wanted to bring clarity to the phenomenon, I wanted to maximize what I could learn through the selected sample. I reflected on which cases were likely to lead to understandings, assertions, and perhaps "petite generalizations" (Stake, 1995, p. 7). While there was a large group of possible cases, accessibility became a primary factor. Thinking through the process I realized I needed to select a case that was easy to get to and hospitable to the concept of being studied. Family support groups by the very nature of the design seemed to be a good starting point. Families open up and discuss the phenomenon as a matter of supporting each other through the process. Finding a support group willing to share their thoughts and feelings as

part of a research project became the foundation of a purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990).

Qualitative research by its design typically focuses on small samples, which are selected purposefully (Patton, 1990). According to Patton (1990) “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 169). The information-rich case allowed for an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships. The case served to shed light on the research questions. Purposeful sampling contained several strategies for the selection of the case. The strategy of maximum variation sampling was utilized to purposely select the information-rich case for this case study (Patton, 1990).

Maximum variation sampling worked for this study as it took into account the possible multiple variations in the participants. This approach turned a small sample-size from a disadvantage to an advantage of the study. Patton (1990) shared the idea that the apparent weakness of the possible heterogeneity of a small sample-size could actually prove to be a strength in that any common patterns would most likely represent the core perceptions of parents of children with ASD towards family/school partnerships. To maximize the variation in the sample-size diverse characteristics of the participants were identified, such as typology of family, type of school district, and type of special education program. That being said the participants of this study were members of a family support group in a suburban community in southwestern Pennsylvania (see Appendix A). Possible limitations due to the participants’ membership in a family support group are discussed later in this chapter.

The support group had a permanent location dedicated to creating a comfortable, welcoming environment for parents of children with ASD. The group was committed to providing a space where parents could come together and exchange ideas, information, and hope.

The focus was on affording opportunities for social interaction for parents and children dealing with the challenges of autism. Information on resources in the local community, informal social events, and professional guest speakers were a mainstay of the planned programming. The participants shared a sense of having a place to discuss their concerns and frustrations in a non-judgmental environment. While the focus was not on providing advocacy for parents as they dealt with professionals in the larger community of services (e.g., schools and community-based services), the parents acted as informal advocates as they supported one another. The parents had a place where they were able to discuss the issues they were facing and receive information from others who had faced similar situations. The encouragements parents gave and received helped the parents to frame their responses as they sought educational services for their children with ASD.

To be eligible to participate in the study the participants were the biological or legal guardians of a student classified with ASD, the students were enrolled or had been enrolled in the public school system and receiving or had received special education services. One student was currently receiving accommodations under a 504-service agreement. A 504-service agreement comes under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C.A. § 794). Section 504 prohibits discrimination against handicapped persons and mandates the providing of aids, services, and accommodations that are designed to meet the educational needs of protected handicapped students. All the students fit the definition of a student classified with autism as found in IDEIA (2004).

Furthermore, the members of the family support group were drawn for the most part from the economic middle class. The school districts of the children were suburban or rural districts with scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) ranging from 58.6% to



72.8% in eleventh grade math and from 75.6% to 83.8% in eleventh grade reading in the 2010-2011 school year. The scores fell in the range of below basic to advanced. The families selected from those willing to volunteer to participate were selected based on the variety they represent. A typology of types of families (two-parent, single-parent, guardianship), types of school district (suburban or rural), and types of special education programs (Itinerant, supplemental, full-time in district building, full-time out of district building) gave a 24-cell matrix to select from for maximum variation sampling. The participants selected represented a variety across the attributes, 10 participants were selected, but they were not necessarily a structured representation (Stake, 2000). Ultimately, the opportunity to learn was the primary focus in the selection of the sample.

#### **4.5 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

The collection of data in a qualitative study resembles daily activities, such as conversations, diaries, letters, or notes. As a researcher, the necessary skills were developed to collect data through these everyday activities. I became systematic in the act of collecting data (e.g., an interview was conducted then document analysis was performed) in order for the collected data to be considered valid (Boeije, 2010). While there were different ways in which data could have been collected in the qualitative research, the research questions and the research purpose guided the preferred method for data collection. In this study, interviews best served to answer the research question and research purpose. Also, an analysis of the relevant document (i.e., the IEP) was undertaken in order to bring clarity to the responses of the participants garnered in the interviews.

#### **4.5.1 Interviews**

According to Fontana and Frey (2000), “interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 645). Interviewing includes many different forms and techniques. The most common form of interviewing is one-on-one, face-to-face verbal exchanges. Other forms are group interviewing, self-administered questionnaires, and phone surveys. All fit the definition of interviewing as a form of conversation in which the interviewer poses questions concerning behaviors, beliefs, ideas, attitudes and experiences on the phenomenon under study (Boeije, 2010). The conversation could occur with individuals or groups who, as participants, limit answers to the questions posed. A reciprocal relationship develops between the researcher and the participant. The researcher is able to gain insight through this relationship of the perspectives and experiences of the participants. Rapport arises out of each person’s genuine interest to bring understanding through the questioning, answering, and listening process of interviewing. By interviewing parents from a parent support group, the developing rapport brought clarity to the perspectives of parents of children with ASD towards family/school partnerships. Designing the interviews based on the needs of the study allowed me to gain the greatest level of understanding (see Appendix B).

In order to establish the direction of the interview a more planned structure was utilized (Boeije, 2010). Determining some sense of the content, formulation and sequence of the questions posed allowed me to manage the direction of the interview (Patton, 1990). However, since the need of the qualitative study was to truly understand what was happening, the interviews were not entirely pre-structured. To allow for the interview to be partially dependent on the flow of the conversation a semi-structured interview model was used (Boeije, 2010). The list of questions and the sequence appears in Appendix B as an interview guide (Patton, 1990).

The questions were intended to facilitate the participants in sharing their thoughts and opinions on family/school partnerships. The researcher was able to aid the participants in remembering and articulating by demonstrating respect for their shared stories. The questions were not only based on what the participants were able to answer, but on the possibility of the answers giving richness and substance to the findings (Weiss, 1994).

Interviews were conducted as one-on-one, face-to-face verbal exchanges. In-person interviewing tended to enhance the development of trust between the participants and the researcher. Moreover, the researcher was able to gain insight through nonverbal communication (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The researcher was able to record the participant's pacing of speech and length of silence in the conversation. Body movements and the posture of the participant also gave insight into the answers to the researcher's questions. Interviews were more than the verbal responses of the participants; interviews were a sum total of the verbal and nonverbal occurrences. However, due to time constraints follow-up interviews took place by phone.

Weiss (1994) encouraged interviews to occur in person, but he also stated when necessary telephone interviews could serve as the next best approach. The researcher found that the telephone interview hindered the full inclusion of nonverbal techniques. Moreover, the telephone interview limited the researcher's connection to the participant, which led to a shorter interview. However, as Weiss (1994) pointed out if it is not possible to be in the presence of the participant the telephone would and did serve as the next best data collection approach in collecting this one interview.

While researchers appear to vary greatly in their use of audio recorders, I decided to record the interviews. Initially, some participants appeared constrained by the presence of the audio recorder, but for the most part, as the interview went on, the participant became

comfortable with the audio recorder. The audio recorder did not prove to have a limiting effect on their sharing of confidences. I was better able to attend to the participants using an audio recorder. The notes taken simultaneously tended to simplify and diminish the richness of the participant's speech patterns (Weiss, 1994). Additionally, audio recording allowed me to work from a transcript that had fidelity to the audio-recorded material. I was able to quote from participants' comments in the findings, leading to a deeper, richer understanding of the phenomenon. Editing participants' comments at the time of analyzing the data allowed me to know what changes were made to the participants' actual comments. Moreover, audio recording was considered as I was trying to capture how the participants perceived or reacted to events rather than learning about the actual events (Weiss, 1994). Trying to understand perceptions and reactions were much more dependent on the nuances and complexities of speech.

The use of the audio recorder led to decisions on transcription. All recordings were transcribed in order to mine the data for a full, rich analysis (Weiss, 1994). I transcribed all of the recordings with the use of *d2u Transcriber for iPad*. Due to confidentiality concerns I listened to the recordings and transcribed the documents. Notes were taken on what was contained on the recordings as an index to facilitate data analysis. Decisions were made based on what allowed for the accomplishing of the goals of the research while keeping in mind the limitations of the technology and the possible restraints.

An initial interview was conducted with all participants. Initial interviews remained within an hour to an hour and a half timeframe. However, a few interviews continued as long as the participant's attention was sustained, the participant was cooperative, and the material gathered was informative. The first interview served to build rapport with the participants. Additionally, the first interview helped in establishing a sense of rhythm between the participant

and the researcher (Weiss, 1994). I was able to establish the outline of the participants' stories as they dealt with their perceptions towards their experiences with family/school partnerships. Second interviews were utilized to confirm understanding of the participants' shared stories. Furthermore, the participants were given an opportunity to reflect on the questions asked in the initial interview activating memories that were then shared in the second interview. Second interviews were conducted by phone. Analysis of the data collected during the initial interviews served as the basis for the selection of the participants for the second interviews. Questions for second interviews were based on the analysis of the first interviews. Second interviews were used to probe the emerging themes found in the data analysis.

#### **4.5.2 Document Review**

A review of the document crucial to the IEP process was undertaken in order to enhance the understanding gathered through interviews. From the perspective of determining the perceptions of parents of students classified with ASD towards family/school partnerships the document that shed light on understanding was the completed IEP. Parents were asked to share the document with the researcher. According to Stake (1995), documents can take the place of observations when observations cannot occur. In this study the document took the place of observations at IEP meetings. This was necessary; as the school districts of the participants of the study have structured their IEPs in such a manner the yearly meetings occur in the late spring of the year. The timeframe placed the IEP meetings out of the reach of the researcher.

## **4.6 PILOT INTERVIEWS**

Pilot interviews were conducted in order to ensure the interview guide supported the study. I constructed my initial understanding of the situation from personal experiences, realizing that there were differences (Weiss, 1994). Expectations of the parents had changed over the course of time, leading me to believe that I did not fully understand the situation, as it now exists. The participants of the study experienced the situation in ways I could not anticipate. By piloting the interview guide, I found which questions worked and which ones were unproductive. During the pilot interviews I was able to find other areas that needed to be explored and other questions that needed to be asked. Two pilot interviews allowed for the developing of an interview guide that served as a start point for the first round of interviews (Weiss, 1994).

The use of the pilot interviews also allowed for the honing of the necessary skills for qualitative interviewing. The interview guide contained the areas I wanted to cover in the interview, along with the listing of questions for each line of inquiry (Weiss, 1994). This visual prompt gave a guide to consult to ensure the interview did not waiver from the areas that needed to be covered. Yet, testing the guide also ensured that I did not become rigid in the use of the interview guide. In order to collect the best data I needed to permit the participants to speak freely, as long as their remarks remained relevant to the topic. Weiss (1994) cautioned against focusing too closely on the interview guide, at the cost of allowing the participants to concentrate on the areas they were most competent to report. The pilot interviews helped to structure the study in such a way as to collect relevant data for the analysis of the perceptions of parents of children with ASD towards family/school partnerships.

#### **4.7 DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES**

Data analysis was an ongoing process (Mertens, 2005). As interviews occurred, findings were generated through the analysis of the data, which fostered additional questions. The additional questions helped to direct the continuation of the study, utilizing phone interviews to clarify interpretations. Moreover, the initial impressions were shared with the participants in order to further interpret the participants' perceptions of family/school partnerships. Participants were able to verify if the essence of their perceptions had been captured. I decided to stay with an interpretation of a statement that was expressed even though the participant later denied the sentiment (Stake, 1995). A follow-up interview was conducted as the substance of the interpretation did shed light on the research question.

In addition, as qualitative research is for the most part text-based, with the text reflecting the natural language of the participants, the text was restructured or coded during the analysis process (Boeije, 2010). The constant review of the data during restructuring allowed for the considering of patterns of similarities and differences that were developed into themes and categories. Furthermore, during the organization of the data I was able to compare the interviews with the impressions I developed in the field. Weaknesses or gaps in the data supported modifications to the study to ensure internal coherence. Reflecting on the data and taking notes helped the study to reach accountability, as the process resulted in the recording of the analytic process (Mertens, 2005). The analytic memos generated documented the process and supported the coding activity (Saldana, 2009). The data collection process was completed when no new patterns emerged during data collection, analysis, and coding.

The codes served as snapshots of the complex meanings generated during the interviews of parents with children with ASD concerning their perceptions of family/school partnerships

(Saldana, 2009). Analytic memos provided a place to capture my thoughts and reflections on the collected data during the coding process. Saldana (2009) reminded us the purpose is to think critically about the ‘what and why’ of the research. This process allowed me to confront and challenge my assumptions in order to determine which coding methods best supported me in taking ownership of the data. According to Saldana (2009) “coding and analytic memo writing are concurrent qualitative data analytic activities” (p. 33) as the development of the coding system had a reciprocal relationship with the understanding of the phenomenon. Determining the appropriate coding method for the study did not occur until initial data collection. Waiting until this point allowed for what Saldana (2009) refers to as “pragmatic eclecticism” (p. 47). This approach in coding allowed me to remain open during initial data collection and review to determine the coding method that led to a substantive analysis of the data.

Following was the potential framework of coding methods considered for this study, decisions changed as the analysis and coding of the data occurred (see Table 4). First cycle coding methods considered were in vivo, emotion, and values coding. Saldana (2009) suggested these coding methods for use with interview transcripts. In vivo coding refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language utilized by the participant. In vivo coding worked well as it is considered a coding method tailored for researchers new to coding data. As I was new to learning how to code data while paying tribute to the participants’ voices, in vivo worked well as a first step in coding. Also, in vivo coding was used with emotion and values coding in order to ensure my understanding of what was significant to the participant.

In vivo coding helped me to keep track of the codes that were participant generated rather than researcher generated (Saldana, 2009). Adding my reflections through analytic memos and second cycle coding helped to limit the number of in vivo codes. The codes helped me to



recognize and appreciate the perceptions and behaviors of the participants in family/school partnerships. In order to not limit the perspective on the data additional coding methods were utilized. The use of additional codes increased the perspective on the data leading to a more conceptual and theoretical view of the phenomenon. Emotion coding enhanced the analysis that arose from in vivo coding.

Emotion coding was based on the emotions experienced and recalled by the participants or inferred by the researcher (Saldana, 2009). This coding method matched my desire to explore the intrapersonal and interpersonal participation experienced and the actions taken of parents in family/school partnerships. Acknowledging and understanding the emotions of the participants provided insight into the participants' perceptions and viewpoints of their relationships with their children's educational programs. According to Saldana (2009) emotion coding is dependent on the researcher's ability to read the nonverbal cues of the participant and infer the underlying causes and effects. Additionally, being able to sympathize and empathize with the participants is critical to emotion coding. My status as a parent of a child with ASD, as well as performing the role of researcher strengthened my abilities in emotion coding. My own experiences supported my ability to read the nonverbal cues of the participants and established my ability to empathize with their experiences. Emotion coding for the complex phenomena of the interactions of parents with children in special education, was supported with sub-codes or simultaneous codes that placed the emotional experience into context (Saldana, 2009). Value coding was a critical concurrent method as emotions generally entwined with values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldana, 2009).

Value coding are codes that reflect a participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs. Throughout the literature review on parents' perceptions of family/school partnership the theme

of perceived life context continually emerged. Perceived life contexts are infused by a person's values, attitudes, and beliefs. If parents' involvement activities are indeed shaped by parents' self-perceived skills and knowledge, and those perceived skills and knowledge are infused by a person's values, attitudes, and beliefs, then codes which capture values, attitudes, and beliefs are essential to understanding the parents' perspectives. Moreover, Saldana (2009) advised the utilization of value coding for case studies, which explored cultural values and intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and behaviors. The interplay of values, attitudes, and beliefs led to understanding the thoughts, feelings, and actions on the part of participants. Understanding how parents were influenced and affected by their position within the community of parents with children with ASD helped in coming to know their perceptions towards family/school partnerships. The use of the coding methods of in vivo, emotion, and value coding supported the emergence of answers to the research questions. A second cycle coding method was needed to deepen the answers through the reorganization and reanalysis of the data that ensured a fuller understanding of the parents' perceptions.

According to Saldana (2009) second cycle methods require the more analytic skills of "classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building" (p. 45). Second cycle coding was needed for a more advanced way to organize and analyze the data than occurred during the first cycle coding. In second cycle coding, original codes were recoded because more accurate words had been discovered that better fit the data. Other codes were dropped as they were found to be marginal to the study and the developing understanding of parents' perceptions of family/school partnerships. Other codes were collapsed together as they were conceptually similar. Second cycle coding supported the establishment of the categories, themes, concepts, and theories found embedded in the first cycle codes.

The second cycle method developed a more selective list of broader categories, themes, and concepts from which the researcher was able to make sense of the data (Saldana, 2009). While the answers to the research questions arose to some degree out of the first cycle coding activities, the second cycle method allowed the researcher to reach the desired analytic level to more thoroughly answer the research questions. The second cycle method of elaborate coding supported a more thorough analysis of this case study. Elaborate coding is referred to as top-down coding as it begins with the theoretical constructs of a previous study. This study is based on the theoretical constructs developed by Bronfenbrenner, Epstein, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Bassler, Burow, and Whetsel that relate to the development and maintenance of family/school partnerships. Relevant text was selected in order to refine the theoretical construct in the context of parents of children with ASD. Elaborate coding supported the analysis of the data in order to confirm, modify, or reject the findings of the previous research as it applied to the population of parents of children with ASD.

Ultimately the diligence I applied during first and second cycle coding, affected the emergence of the categories, themes, or concepts. According to Saldana (2009) once this point is reached a period of reflection leads to the final report. This reflection was based around focusing strategies and rising above the data that had been collected by ordering and reordering the emergent themes. The time spent supported the writing of the final report. Focusing strategies ensured that I did not get lost in the magnitude of the study, but instead was able to find its core. Rising above the data was necessary when the initial codes and themes appeared to capture only the surface essence of the parents' perceptions of family/school partnerships. Ordering and reordering the emergent themes allowed the researcher to find how the final set of categories, themes, and concepts worked best together. Saldana (2009) suggested physically manipulating

and arranging categories to help in the discovery of the hierarchy, interrelationship, and structure of the themes and concepts. Moreover, the analytic memos facilitated the process of discovery through supporting the manipulation and arranging of the categories and the building of the themes and concepts. This knowledge led to a stronger degree of analytic interpretation of the data.

The approaches utilized in data analysis allowed me to demonstrate the level of analytic prowess needed to answer the research questions in such a manner as to lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

**Table 4. Framework of Codes**

Research Questions	Assumptions of Researcher	Framework of Codes
What is the perception of parents of students classified with ASD towards family/school partnership?	Parents of students classified with ASD perceive family/school partnerships as more rhetoric than reality.	In Vivo Coding Elaborate Coding
In what ways do parents of students classified with ASD describe the motivators for their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?	Parents of students classified with ASD feel motivated to participate (collaborate) with educational professionals when they feel included in decision-making, they believe they have something to add which benefits their children, they believe they have a responsibility in relation to their children, and their life contexts shape their decisions for participation (collaborating).	Elaborate Coding Value Coding Emotion Coding In Vivo Coding
What barriers do parents of students classified with ASD believe they encounter in their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?	Parents of students classified with ASD believe motivators that are not implemented with fidelity serve as barriers to participation (collaborating), for example being spoken at rather than with, being presented with a completed IEP with no time allotted for input, being convinced they lack the necessary knowledge and/or expertise, etc. Also, life contexts can serve as barriers, for example cultural beliefs concerning family/school interactions, life commitments and/or responsibilities that limit or restrict time for participation, etc.	Emotion Coding Elaborate Coding Value Coding In Vivo Coding
How do parents of students classified with ASD describe the relationships that arise out of their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals?	Parents of students classified with ASD describe their relationships that arise out of participation based on the success or failure of their interactions and the success or failure of their children in special education.	In Vivo Coding Emotion Coding Value Coding Elaborate Coding

What roles do parents believe they hold in the educational lives of their children with ASD?	Parents of children with ASD may have a diversity of beliefs on their roles in the educational lives of their children. However, their children having ASD has a major influence on how they see their roles.	In Vivo Coding Emotion Coding Value Coding Elaborate Coding
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## 4.8 TRIANGULATION

Methodological triangulation was utilized in order to ensure accuracy in the analysis of data, as well as the searching for alternative explanations. Triangulation allowed for the moving beyond “common sense” to “protocols which do not depend on mere intuition and good intention to get it right” (Stake, 1995, p. 107). According to Stake (1995) the possible protocols are data source triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation best fit the design of this case study. Methodological triangulation increased confidence in the interpretations by the use of multiple methods of data collecting. In this case study data was collected through interviews and document reviews. The interviewing and document reviews allowed for the better analysis of the same phenomenon across the participants of the study (Patton, 1990).

Furthermore, participants helped to validate my sense of situation and reporting through their own critical interpretations and observations of my interpretations (Stake, 2000). Participants were asked to examine the rough draft of my interpretation of their interview after the write up was completed. I asked the participants to review the material for accuracy and a general sense of rightness of the translation of their words. I did not promise the participants

which version would appear in the final document, but they were encouraged to provide their interpretation or alternative language. Stake (1995) shares that often the feedback is worthy of inclusion in the final document. Hence, using methodological triangulation allowed for the best capture of the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships.

#### **4.9 CONDITIONS OF THE STUDY**

A major condition of this study was the sample. Participants were members of a parent support group located in western Pennsylvania. As such the parents were already demonstrating behavior that was more action oriented by virtue of their joining into a group. These parents further represented a more narrow range of parents with children with ASD with a greater commitment to involvement than possibly found in the larger population. However, to mitigate this concern a purposeful sample of participants was developed through maximum variation sampling. A 24-cell matrix of the possible topography of individuals for the case study was developed. The diverse characteristics of the participants alleviated any concern towards the representation of common patterns as those of core perceptions of a wider group of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships.

Additionally, the members of the parent support group came from a geographically small area of western Pennsylvania. The degree of cultural differences in the makeup of the support group was very nominal. Future research in culturally diverse neighborhoods with subgroups of parents of children with ASD would enhance our overall knowledge in this area.

## **5.0 REPORT OF FINDINGS: HOW DO PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH ASD PERCIEVE FAMILY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

Chapters 5 through 9 report on the issues that emerged out of the coding of the interviews of parents of students with ASD and the reviews of the IEP documents in light of family/school partnership. Issue-focused analysis allowed the researcher to describe what had been learned from the participants concerning parents in their situation (Weiss, 1994). The focus remained on what was learned from all participants, with some participants contributing more to the analysis of the data. Coding predominated early on in the analytic process, and was supported by sorting and integrating the interview transcripts and the analytic memos. That being said it naturally followed that the reporting of the findings relied heavily on the discussion of the issues. The discussion of the issues brought together the whole, describing the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships for the group represented by the participants. Furthermore, the literature review served to integrate the interpretation of the data and the answering of the research questions. The personal experience of the researcher was dealt with throughout the analytic process in order to limit bias in the reporting of the findings.

Chapter 5 serves as a roadmap to facilitate the reader as he or she reads the report of the findings. A chart of the participants with their demographic information was included so the reader may reference the information as they continue on through the following chapters.



Knowing the background of the participants may help the reader understand the choices the researcher made in the interpretation of the data. Moreover, this chapter reports on the codes developed from the interviews of the parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships, as well as the codes brought forward from the work of Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005). The creation of the concepts and categories found within the report are directly linked to the codes utilized in the analytic process. Each section or chapter of the findings shares the responses of the participants as they relate to the research question. This sharing arose out of the material deemed appropriate to each chapter of the findings and the particular coding of that material. A chart of the framework of the report of the findings was included so readers are able to follow the analytic process that led to the findings.

## **5.1 THE PARTICIPANTS**

Parents of students classified with ASD who were members of a parent support group located in western Pennsylvania and their classified students served as the participants of this study. Maximum-variation sampling was utilized in order to find the most diverse participants possible in this setting that had limited diversity. The following table presents the demographic information for each participant.

**Table 5. Demographics of Participants**

	Gender	Race	Education	Profession/ Occupation	Age of Child	Placement in SPED	Location of Program
A	Female	White	College Degree: Sociology	Juvenile Justice	12	Itinerant	Neighborhood School
B	Female	White	Some College	Banker/ Fulltime Mother	10	Itinerant	Neighborhood School
C	Male	White	College Degree: Business/ Computers	Software Engineer	10	Itinerant	Neighborhood School
D	*Female	White	College Degree: Journalism	Journalist	20	Itinerant	Neighborhood School
E	Female	White	College Degree: Special Education	Educator	14	Inclusion (504- Service Agreement)	Neighborhood School
F	Male	White	k-12 Education	Student	12	Itinerant	Neighborhood School
G	Male	White	k-12 Education	Student	10	Itinerant	Neighborhood School
H	Male	White	k-12 Education	Student	10	Itinerant	Neighborhood School
J	Male	White	k-12 Education	Student	14	Itinerant	Neighborhood School

\*Note: Parent D's son is currently attending Community College having graduated from high school. A review of his IEP document was not included in the document review.

## **5.2 FRAMEWORK FOR THE REPORT OF FINDINGS**

The perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships appear to be situational; evolving over the course of time the student is receiving special education services. Analyzing the collected data utilizing the following codes led me to believe that there is much we can learn concerning family/school partnerships from the parents' perceptions.

**Table 6. Framework of Report of Findings**

Chapter/Research Questions	Codes	Concepts/Categories	Themes/Sub-Codes
In what ways do parents of students classified with ASD describe the motivators for their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals	Elaborate  Value  Emotion  Elaborate  Elaborate  Value In vivo	Invitation to Involvement  Trust  Emotional Connect  Parental Efficacy  Role Construction Team Approach Parent's Knowledge It's the Law	Friendship Communication "Open-Door" Policy Kindness Follow Through Supporting Student Learning Understanding Accommodating Student Success Reflection
What barriers do parents of students with ASD believe they encounter in participation (collaborating) with educational professionals	Emotion  Elaborate  Value  Emotion  Value Elaborate In vivo	Emotional Connect  Invitation to Involvement  Parent's Knowledge  Frustration  Trust Perceived Life Contexts Parental Efficacy Team Approach	Lack of Understanding Emotional Disconnect Judgment "Standoffish" Negative Outreach Lack of Communication Knowledge of Special Education (IDEIA) Lack of Support for Parents Lack of Support for Students Low Trust
How do parents of students classified with ASD describe the relationships that arise out of their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals	Emotion  Elaborate  Value  Elaborate Emotion In vivo  Elaborate	Emotional Connect  Invitation to Involvement  Trust  Parental Efficacy Frustration Team Approach  Role Construction Perceived Life Contexts	Connected Unconnected Friendly Unfriendly Constancy Untrustworthy  Functional Dysfunctional

	In vivo	It's the Law	
What roles do parents believe they have in the educational lives of their children with ASD	Elaborate	Role Construction	Obtaining a Diagnosis Special Education Procedures Special Education Accommodations Academic Success Social Success Gaining Knowledge of ASD School Events

The categories of role construction, parental efficacy, invitation to involvement, and perceived life contexts arose out of the literature review. The definition for these codes can be found in chapter 1 sections 1.2.5, 1.2.6, 1.2.7, and 1.2.8. Team approach was defined for this study as the individualized education program team as determined by special education law (IDEIA, P.L. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. Section 614 (d) (1) (b) (i-vii), 2004).

Individualized education program team:

(i) parents of a child with a disability; (ii) not less than 1 regular education teacher of such child; (iii) not less than 1 special education teacher; (iv) a representative of the local education agency; (v) an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results, who may be a member of the team; (vi) at the discretion of the parent or the agency, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel as appropriate; and (vii) whenever appropriate, the child with a disability.

Furthermore, team approach was defined as the team working together or any one of the student's teachers and parents for the benefit of the student. Team approach included coordination, consultation, and collaboration. Coordination was defined for this study as ongoing communication and cooperation to ensure that services were provided in a timely and

systematic fashion (Heward, 2009). Consultation was defined for this study as team members providing information and expertise to one another. The expertise was generally unidirectional with the expert providing assistance and advice to the novice. Collaboration included all of the components of coordination and consultation, as well as the reciprocity and sharing of information amongst all of the team members equally. Consensus reaching and group decision-making were also hallmarks of the team approach based around collaboration.

The category of “it’s the law” reflects the mandates of family/school partnerships and the providing of special education services to an exceptional student as found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, P.L. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. Secs. 1400 et seq. Chapter 3 fully defines all aspects of the code ‘it’s the law’ as it applies to exceptional students and their families relevant to family/school partnerships. Parent’s knowledge was defined for this study as the parent’s knowledge of the processes of special education as found in IDEIA (2004) and/or their knowledge of autism, its characteristics, and its affect on their student with ASD. Trust arose out of the literature review and was defined for this study as the parents’ perception of the follow through of educational professionals on the programs developed in the IEP. Trust was further defined as information being clearly shared and disseminated on a regular basis, the respect educational professionals hold for exceptional students, and their willingness to support student learning. Additionally, as seen in the literature review, parents with children in special education communicated their need for the teachers to support their decisions and opinions in order for trust to develop (Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

Emotional connect reflects Bronfenbrenner’s (1992) concept of human development as a set of processes where the elements of the person and the environment interact to produce the constancy and change that occurs over the course of a lifetime. The emotional connection

between the educational professionals and the students with ASD revealed both the helpful and harmful impacts of the interactions as captured in bio-ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). That being said, emotional connect was defined in this study as the interactions between educational professionals and students with ASD due to the student's exceptionality. Frustration was defined for this study as dissatisfaction with someone or something that arose out of having a student classified with the exceptionality of ASD.

In the next four chapters, the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnership is presented based upon the four sub-questions that have guided and enlightened the course of this study. Findings are offered first according to the research sub-questions and then according to the analytic themes that surfaced through the coding of the interviews. Moreover, the discussion highlights the connections between the literature review and the findings. Ultimately, woven through the presentation is the researcher's interpretation of the data.

## **6.0 REPORT OF FINDINGS: IN WHAT WAYS DO PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH ASD DESCRIBE THE MOTIVATORS FOR THEIR PARTICIPATION (COLLABORATING) WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS?**

Parents of students classified with ASD describe the motivators for their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals in many of the same ways as parents of children without exceptionalities (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005). The stories shared by the participants of this study reinforced the appropriateness of the categories of role construction, parental efficacy, invitation to involvement, and trust as motivators for participating (collaborating) with educational professionals. In addition, the categories of team approach, it's the law, parent's knowledge, and emotional connect which emerged from the coding of the interviews proved to be motivators for this set of parents.

While there are similarities, there are also differences. As a result, the categories that emerged in the literature review acquired a richer and fuller meaning, incorporating the socio-cultural impact of the child's disability, as well as the disability's impact on academic endeavors (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). The definitions of role construction, parental efficacy, and invitation to involvement were expanded in order to integrate the knowledge gained from the participants. As seen within the literature review these definitions now include the concepts of bio-ecological theory of human development and overlapping spheres of influence as they apply to a student's disability (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Epstein, 2001a). This ensures that the socio-

cultural impact of the student's disability and the disability's impact on academic endeavors are acknowledged and included within the definitions of the aforementioned categories.

## **6.1 INVITATION TO INVOLVEMENT AS A MOTIVATOR**

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) defined the concept of invitation to involvement as the broad school attributes and activities that convey to parents they are a welcomed and invaluable resource for supporting student success. The expressing of respect for parents was especially important for parents who felt marginalized from their children's educational experience (Brandon, 2007). Some of the parents of this study had difficulty connecting with their children's schools because of the characteristics displayed by their children as a result of ASD. This changed when the parents were motivated towards a perception of family/school partnership. When analyzing invitation to involvement, as it applied to motivation for parents of students with ASD, the participants expressed the themes of friendship, communication, an open-door policy and acts of kindness.

### **6.1.1 Friendship**

Friendship appeared to emerge out of the willingness of professional educators to extend themselves to the parents. Parent B referred to the friendship that developed as a result of a teacher's ability to engage in active listening. Parent B also shared a friendship with another teacher who was willing to share personal stories in order to comfort the parent as she faced a new developmental milestone with her son. Friendship developed as a result of a teacher's



willingness to spend personal time with a family for Parent C. As Lin and Bates (2010) concluded home visits allowed a teacher to connect with a family and a child. For Parent D the teacher's care of her son influenced her feelings towards the teacher and the school district as a whole.

Parent B: Well we became pretty good friends because of it... um I meant to this day I still interact with her and talk to her... go in and help her. You know so she is a person that no matter what you are talking about she is listening one hundred percent... even if she is multitasking... she doesn't let you get away like most people would blow you off and she is listening.

Parent B: The emotional support teacher is a friend (*and she is in the building*) which we are going to. She already told me that she has had a child on the spectrum and how to work this and what direction to take so that bridge is already in effect.

Parent C: We had the teacher over for dinner... last year's teacher.

Parent D: In first grade he had a wonderful teacher. If (child) would stand up and clap the sponges... she was very huggy... a sweet young teacher. And he was like the king of the room and he was the smallest by far.

### **6.1.2 Communication**

Communication appeared as another important theme in helping parents to feel invited into the educational system (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Parent C expressed how important it was to him to

share his knowledge of his son's development to a school staff that communicated their desire to hear his "voice." He believed the teachers were inviting his participation into the evaluation and classification process. The use of technology supported educational professionals in the act of communicating with parents. Parent D had expressed to her son's counselor how important it was to her for her son to become more actively engaged in the social life of the school. In response the counselor sent a communication, which allowed the mother to focus on facilitating the son in this endeavor. Once again communication helped a parent to feel invited into the school process.

Technology also allowed Parent B to access her son's grades in order to support his continuing success. This form of communication let the parent know she served a valuable educational function for her child. As stated in the literature review, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) shared that broad attributes of a school convey to parents that their involvement is welcomed and a valuable resource for their children. The use of a computer based program that allowed parents to gather real time data on how their children were doing served as a broad attribute that welcomed families into involvement. This supported Feuerstein's (2000) finding that the greatest parent engagement rates occurred in schools that kept parents abreast of behavior, grades, and general information.

Parent C: Yes... our voice was asked for... they were very much trying to understand and gather information so they could make a decision if he you know was on the spectrum... or was it something else.

Parent B: Sometimes in email.

Parent D: This year I really want to push for a club so he gets the socialization... the counselor sent me an email today with the

actually list of the clubs with a brief description so now I can go home over the weekend and sit with (son) and talk to him about what... which one he might like to do. I already told him that he needs to do one. He needs that social interaction. So the school's very accommodating with that type of interaction.

Parent D: His current principal does send home letters to the student parents that are general for the whole population and gives an update as to what is going on. In fact I just got one that involved reminding that there will be several activity days and dances throughout the year... dress code issues because its still warm out. You know just reminding.

Parent D: Its very comfortable I can easily email back and forth. He knows my background as a Professor and respects that... emails me and we are on a first name basis. So that's very comfortable when I go in.

Parent B: With that I don't know if it... he doesn't have a fire in him. It's... I want A's. Did you know you got 12 out of 20 on this? Well why? I don't know. Because there's no fire and he gets upset with you. He doesn't have that fire and passion. I don't know if that's him or whatever but I'm talking about that little bit of a fire. We were just talking about that the other day... instead of saying they have electronic reporting cards... we showed him and he is right on the cusp of all A's and he knows what he needs to do to get there.

Instead of when he has homework I have to get this done. This is another opportunity for me to get my A. And to get to my goal because it's an opportunity... not this is what I have to do now.

### **6.1.3 “Open-Door” Policy**

Professional educators who acknowledged parents as essential partners with knowledge, concerns, and ideas created welcoming environments that encouraged family/school partnerships (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). This welcoming environment served as an open door, communicating to parents the professional educators' belief in the families' right to be a full participant in the education of their children. This welcoming environment was expressed as the theme “open-door” policy. An “open-door” policy conveyed a message of a welcoming school climate to Parent B and Parent D. Parent B spoke of volunteering in the classroom and the teacher's willingness to take a moment to inform her of her son's learning progress. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al. (2005) advanced the notion that positive interactions on the part of the school staff as experienced by Parent B were instrumental in empowering parents and leading to parental involvement. Parent D found the “open-door” policy of the cyber charter school to be a refreshing experience welcoming her and her son into the school.

Parent B: I often volunteer and next year will be a little different... so once a month when I am doing their bulletin boards for the teacher... we will have a little bit of a meeting and I find out how's he doing and what is going on. That kind of thing... so long as she has the time to do it. And I get a little update about what's working. I get the

little comments on how he is proceeding and when we were talking about the difference... where he is susceptible.

Parent D: So I am suppose to have this meeting with his 3 teachers and they decided that if I came in a couple of days before school started while they were preparing their rooms... the rooms that would be good for them. And I was always about... because I didn't work at the time... so I was always about whatever you need.

Parent D: And at that time too... I had met a friend who her daughter was in (a cyber charter school)... so (son) and I just showed up there and we said this is what has been going on. And it's really good for him because we got a tremendous amount of support.

#### **6.1.4 Kindness**

Kindness appeared to serve as a potential gatekeeper for invitation to involvement for Parent D. Parent D shared her belief in reaching out to parents by focusing on the students with kindness. Parental attitudes reflected the commitment to involvement found in Coots (1998) when parents felt welcomed into the parental involvement process. Kindness appeared to draw the parents in as it reflected a school characteristic valued by the parents.

Parent D: To keep the focus on the students. They are not really trying to be like the bane of existence for anybody. And that parents... you know... parents come in all different abilities as well... and let the needs of the child direct the conversation and the information they are sharing with parents. I have even had parents come to me and

not know that their son or daughter is um... not even eligible... but you know... having an evaluation is the first step. And its almost like if they keep it a secret until... they you know... the parent figures it out so they delay maybe the help they are getting... I don't know but just... and I don't know if things like kindness... certainly a lot of accommodations they are made for students with an IEP can help a lot of other students as well so I don't see how sometimes those things should be considered like extra. But I think a lot of things that you can do are free... being polite and respectful and um even figuring out new ways being a little more creative doesn't come at a cost. So even as you know school districts struggle to afford so-called special ed students um I don't think that we have to completely base it on the negative.

## **6.2 TRUST AS A MOTIVATOR**

In the literature review the concept of trust was shown to be an important factor in the development of long-lasting partnerships between educational professionals and parents (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Parents shared with Soodak and Erwin (2000) that trust developed when teachers follow through on their word and when they willingly support the learning of struggling students.

### 6.2.1 Follow Through

Soodak and Erwin (2000) found that teacher follow through was instrumental in the forming of a constructive relationship between parents and educational professionals. Parents of students with disabilities further expressed the need for teachers to follow through on the programming developed in a student's IEP. Parent B shared that trust developed for her when the emotional support teacher not only followed through on the programming found within the IEP, but also helped her son to progress in his IEP goals. Parent E was able to express her developing trust level, sharing that she was able to trust 95% of the educational professionals working with her son. Parent D was impressed with how one group of educational professionals followed through on a goal to support the student in handing in his homework. Her level of trust for this group of educators exceeded prior relationships, causing a strong partnership to form for her for the first time.

Parent B: Now I have to tell you the emotional support teacher is absolutely fantastic. She spends once a week with our son and she has gotten him to a point where he will talk to her right then and there and she's able to get through to him even though the talking heads are saying. It's a matter that there's been a lot of progress... playground for instance... so far about the rule and the kids change the rules and some of the boys are rude... they won't let him be a part until someone says something... that is part of the issues.

Parent E: Um I definitely have trust I would say for 95% of them.

Parent D: Now they did notice he didn't hand in homework and I remember them saying to me that they figured it out... they said that (son)...

um that (son)... he had to have a personal invitation... that's how they worded it they said that if they... class hand in your homework... he wouldn't... but if they went up to him and said... (son) we need your math homework he would hand it to them.

Parent D: And um he was very small in stature. Always. But he would come off as very bright and that would trick people... then when he got in to the first grade... teacher suggested he be tested for gifted... which he was. So in second grade he was the only second grade student at school that met with the gifted teacher.

### **6.2.2 Supporting Student Learning**

Parents of students with ASD expressed a need for educational professionals to display a willingness to help their students learn (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). The commitment to student learning communicated to parents a respect for their children. This respect served as a strong foundation for the development of a positive partnership through trust. Parent B shared the teacher's commitment to ensuring her son's development in social skills. Her son had been struggling with standing up for himself in social and academic settings. With the teacher's support her son was demonstrating this ability within academic settings. The parent further shared full trust in the teacher to address this issue within the social setting. The trust that developed allowed the parent to move beyond a hyper-vigilant state in the school setting. Parent C found the teacher's commitment for supporting student learning as an opportunity for his son to interact with neuro-typical peers. This father expressed a concern for the isolation his son was experiencing and saw this as his son's opportunity to connect with others.



Parent B: Groups... he is having issues but he is starting to stand up and say no to things... he's learning how to take care of himself. When I say he is not standing up for himself... she is saying wait a minute he is standing up... but it does depend on what it is. When a kid comes through the bus and does this he doesn't say anything but in the classroom trying to make a point academically he knows how to do it.

Parent C: They use groups to teach in and that gives him a chance to interact with many different kids. And he is learning to stand up for himself. There was one point where the teacher wanted one answer but he was taking it somewhere else and the teacher said well what do you mean by that. And when he explained it to her of how he was doing things she said that's very good... so he was not only doing it with the kids... he was doing it with the grown ups. And he got another point.

Parent B: Groups though force him to interact with other kids... a math group... a reading group.

Parent C: Correct me if I am wrong... but they have different groups... they are not in the same group the entire time. So he is forced to interact with many different kids.

Parent C: And even the reading group... they switch kids around into different reading groups.

### **6.3 EMOTIONAL CONNECT AS A MOTIVATOR**

A concept emerged from the interviews based on the parents' perceptions of the emotional connection educational professionals demonstrated towards their students. This concept fit with Bronfenbrenner's (1992) bio-ecological theory of human development. Hence, the naming of the theme as "emotional connect" emerged from how the parents described their perceptions of the interactions of educational professionals with their children. Furthermore, the students were supported through the themes found within emotional connect of understanding and accommodating. Emotional connect served as both a motivator as seen in the following parent excerpts and a barrier as covered in the next chapter.

#### **6.3.1 Understanding**

Christensen (2004) reinforced a theme of understanding on the quality of the interaction and ongoing connections between schools and families. His research led to an appreciation of the importance of promoting the social and academic development of a child in order to create a strong relationship between families and educational professionals. Understanding the impact of the concept of circular causality (i.e., change in one individual affects other individuals) emerged when Parent B shared the relationship between a teacher and her son. This teacher understood the interrelationship of students' disabilities and student performance in the classroom. She was able to see beyond the daily impact of the disability to the potential hidden below. This ability led to the parent's perception that the change in the teacher's understanding of her son's disability affected a change within the functioning level of her son in the context of the disability. This theme also presented itself in Parent D's sharing of her willingness to ignore a

designation of gifted in order for her child to be placed with a group of teachers who understood the impact of his disability on his overall performance. Parent E stated the importance of understanding in the very simple statement found below.

Parent B: This particular teacher she knows what she's doing... she's been doing this a long time and she sees the kids' way beyond where they are at... she's very... very good at that.

Parent D: I have a teacher that I am still friends with because when she approached me at the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade year... she said we would like (your son) to be on our 6<sup>th</sup> grade team. We are not the gifted team but she said we have a lot of mix of students and we know what (your son)... we feel we are best suited because they knew the horrors that went on. So I agreed... that was the first time I agreed to ignore the fact that he was you know has this gifted group of friends that he's known and been in classes with all these years and were kind to him for the most part... you know. But it was a great year.

Parent D: So there are other teachers and some teachers were outstanding but they did everything they could possibly do to try to understand.

Parent E: Teachers love him.

### **6.3.2 Accommodating**

The willingness of the educational professionals to accommodate the students displayed the synergism found within Bronfenbrenner's (1992) bio-ecological theory of human development.

The accommodations changed the existing relationship between the students and the environment resulting in developmental change for the students. This willingness allowed an emotional connection to emerge supporting the parents' desire to interact with the school environment. Epstein's concept of force pulled together the parents and the educational professionals through the accommodations provided. This maximum overlap resulted from the parents' belief the teachers had emotionally connected to their children. This emotional connect served as an assurance to the parents the educational professionals would provide the accommodations needed by the students to meet success.

Parent E: He's now in eighth grade and both of the intermediate school and now the middle school... they... the overall general school... was very accommodating for him.

Parent E: But overall they seem very accepting of him and willing to work with him.

Parent E: He is someone that he can go to if there is a problem at school... he can go into the office on the spur of the moment. And if he's there he will take the time to spend time with him... or if he sees him in the hallway he will talk with him.

#### **6.4 PARENTAL EFFICACY AS A MOTIVATOR**

Parental efficacy suggested parents became involved in forming a partnership with their children's schools when they believed they could make a difference (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992). The parents of this study created goals in line with

their beliefs in their ability to support their children with ASD. The themes of student success and the ability to be reflective emerged in light of parental efficacy as a motivator. The parents expressed a desire to become involved when they had an ability to shape student success. Reflection allowed the parents to determine moments when their efforts led to success for their children. Moreover, reflection gave them a window into the past in order to gain greater understanding of the characteristics their children presented as a result of having ASD. This understanding helped the parents to believe they had made a difference in the past and could continue to in the future.

#### **6.4.1 Student Success and Parental Efficacy**

Parental efficacy led to the parents being involved in their students' achievement within the school environment. Fan and Chen (2001) found a correlation between parental involvement indicators and achievement outcome variables. Their analysis confirmed a positive relationship between parental involvement and student achievement. As noted in Parent B's statement, Parent B was able to support her son to ask the teacher a question when he did not understand why his work was marked incorrect. This engagement of the educational professional allowed the student to explain his work and resulted in the teacher finding reasons to support the change in the grade. Engagement of another in conversation is a difficult task for children with ASD, but the parent's belief in her ability to make a difference allowed her to support her son in this endeavor. The teacher's finding helped to reinforce the parent's belief in her parental efficacy. This encounter served to motivate greater collaboration between the parent and the educational professional due to parental efficacy.

Parent B: And doing this because he is getting to go to a school. I mean all the websites I am reading... that when they do have a philosophy. In sixth grade there's a teacher out there who says when something is wrong they come up and ask me. We are trying that now. And he found it out it works right for him. He went to ask her and found out what he needed to do. What does it say about why you need to be engaged?

Parent C was also motivated to greater collaboration through parental efficacy. Parent C utilized a novel intervention to help his son to be organized and overcome difficulties with memory. The educational professional reinforced the father's collaboration by praising the intervention and utilizing the approach with the student (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler et al., 2005).

Parent C: Um the school... they help... in fact one of the other things we were trying to resolve and I think we resolved some of it. He would sometimes... he would forget things... so what I did to help him... I would put a luggage tag on his book bag and then write down your book... three or four things that he needs to remember to bring back and forth. To have him remember whenever he zips his book bag he sees that and would remember and the teacher said that's a great idea.

A parent's concern for the future and her belief in her ability to make a difference caused the parent to voice her concerns. The educational professional reinforced the mother through his acceptance of the legitimacy of the concern. He further assured the parent that he would do all

that he could to support the transition to the new building. The educational professional's response assured the parent that she had the ability to make a difference, hence reinforcing parental efficacy. This reinforcing strengthened the parent's commitment to collaboration with the school district.

Parent B: My first concern was that bridge... because we only got one year in the school and we were bridging (*to the next building*). He told me that the bridge would be there and it will work and if not you will call me if you have any issues. And he's told me that on several occasions.

#### **6.4.2 Reflection**

Reflection allowed Parent B to acknowledge all of the times she had been successful in helping her son. According to Brandon (2007) parents who believe in their ability to reach success will be more persistent in times of struggle for their children. Parent B shared her belief in her ability to persist into the future based on her reflection of the past.

Parent B: Well, I think the other thing... and I think the other part of that is what I shared with you about going back down the golden road and this is what happened in third grade... this is what happened in second grade... this is what happened in first grade... kindergartner... preschool. Oh my gosh when he was here and four he looked at me and said "please don't" you know and that to me was the very first big time of seeing... and once you understand that it's easy to go forward. If you are sitting in the

world of and we knew there was a matter of there's something wrong... oh God... from our own background its happened so much to us its not a matter of Oh my God... it's understanding now what and then going back and saying how can I understand this... it's easier to focus in on I understand.

## **6.5 ROLE CONSTRUCTION AS A MOTIVATOR**

Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel et al. (2005) shared parents behavior followed what they believed they were supposed to do in relation to their children's education. Furthermore, families based their behavior on their knowledge of child development and their role in optimizing their children's development. The parents within this study have invested time in coming to greater understanding of the characteristics of ASD and the possible impact on their children's learning. Parent B and Parent C shared their knowledge of their children in the context of their children's disability with educational professionals. Parent B heard the educational professional's concern of her child's demonstrating characteristics of ASD in the classroom. The parent listened to the concern and investigated the possibility based on the teacher's concern as well as her own concerns within the home environment. Parent C actively shared his knowledge concerning the son's developmental patterns, as he knew them. These patterns of behavior reinforced the concept of role construction as a motivator for family/school partnerships.

Parent B: Yes, she was the one who (*started the process*). Unofficially, they are not allowed to diagnose.



Parent C: The assessment meeting... in that one we took more of a role at that point because we were answering a lot of the questions... then trying to get a lot of information out. The second one was more of a OK were talking a little bit... but I want to interact with (*son*) and see where he is at.

## **6.6 TEAM APPROACH AS A MOTIVATOR**

IDEIA (2004) assured parents of their legal right to involvement through the IEP safeguards. This process was intended as a team approach with parents having equal status in the decisions made in order to direct the educational needs of their children. The preamble of IDEIA (2004) stated quality family/school collaboration must occur for the development of an effective program for the student. Communication in this model became the hallmark of family/school partnerships (IDEIA, 2004). Moreover, as seen in the definition of team approach all forms of teaming depended on ongoing communication to ensure services are provided to exceptional students (Heward, 2009). Parent E communicated the desire of the educational professionals to team with her through her knowledge of her son. Parent D spoke of the need for parents to be heard and respected in order for a team approach to occur. The concept of team approach motivated these parents to engage actively in family/school collaboration.

Parent E: Um... yea I guess I would say I really do. I mean they really want my input they do understand that um I know my son and I know what accommodations that he needs um for the most part.

Parent D: I do think parents need to be heard and respected and I still get this from parents that there are certain things aren't happening for their kid or that they are getting a lot of pushback from like the special ed department over... but I think a lot its not probably more than ever before... budget is controlling a lot of what our kids like what they provide or don't.

## **6.7 PARENT'S KNOWLEDGE AS A MOTIVATOR**

The importance of parents' knowledge in light of family/school partnerships was summarized throughout the literature review. Ferlazzo (2011) shared the results of a study of high school teachers who spent the summer months gathering information from parents of students who struggled passing the California High School Exit Exam. The information gathered from the parents allowed the professional educators to better support the students in meeting success. The parents translated the educator's emphasis on parental knowledge as an encouragement for family/school partnership. Parent B was motivated to participate based on her knowledge of her son's ASD and her ability to share the knowledge with his teachers. Her folksy way of explaining the disorder captured the imagination painting a vivid picture of the characteristics displayed by her son.

Parent B: And we can realize that Aspersers take things very, very literally. The scary thing was at that age he knew what "I'm going to kill you" meant but he reacted exactly that way but we didn't know why.

Parent B: But if (*it*) looks like a duck and sounds like a duck and waddles like a duck it might be a duck but it isn't a cow.

## **6.8 “IT’S THE LAW” AS A MOTIVATOR**

IDEIA (2004) directed meaningful opportunities to participate for all families of children with disabilities. Parents must be included in a meaningful manner in order to ensure the viability of special education services. Greater participation for parents is specified in the six major principles contained in the law: due process safeguards, shared decision-making, zero reject, nondiscriminatory identification and evaluation, free appropriate public education and least restrictive environment (IDEIA, 2004). Parent E spoke of the greater need to communicate to parents the rights they and their children have under special education. Parents in her acquaintance were unable to access services for their children because they did not know of the possibility of services. Knowing the law motivated Parent E to ask for an evaluation for her son. The evaluation led to his being found eligible for services. The determination of eligibility served as a motivator to participate with professional educators as observed within the law.

Parent E: I think the biggest one would just be the communications to the parents knowing that there are services... a lot of parents have kiddos that struggle that are... I talk to other parents and like you got what... your sons getting what and I'm like "yea". There's not that communication of what is available what you can ask for... what is there... I think that that would be the biggest thing.

## **6.9 SUMMARY OF THE MOTIVATORS FOR PARTICIPATION WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS**

The preceding categories served as motivators for parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships. The category of invitation to involvement served as the strongest motivator towards involvement for this group of parents. They felt invited into participation through friendship, communication, an open-door policy of the school and acts of kindness. Friendship expressed towards the parents appeared to have had the greatest motivating affect. As seen in the literature review educational professionals became more empathetic and compassionate as they engaged families in friendship (Lin & Bates, 2010). The educational professionals became more familiar with the forces acting on the family on a daily basis. This knowledge allowed the educational professionals to adjust their perception of family/school partnerships to more closely align with the perceptions of the parents. The parents acted on this alignment by becoming increasingly motivated to engage in family/school partnerships.

Communication, an open-door policy, and acts of kindness further enhanced parents' perception of being welcomed into the environment of school. Communication served to ensure parents that their voices had a place in the services provided for their children. Here too parents were welcomed into the whole process equally. Special education represented a service the students were receiving, not the full educational experience. The parents were kept abreast of all school developments through multiple means of communication. The open-door policy was a message conveyed for all parents with the parents of this study representing just a piece of the student body. The parents did share a willingness on the part of the educational professionals to ensure the parents felt as welcomed as all parents into their classrooms and school environment. This message appeared to resonate with the parents causing them to perceive a strong welcoming

force in the school environment (Epstein & Connors, 1995). Kindness appeared to serve as a gatekeeper, communicating to parents the importance of their children to the educational professionals. Kindness towards students with special needs was expressed as a very important school characteristic for the parents of this study. Once again through communication, an open-door policy, and kindness the parents were motivated towards a greater perception of family/school partnership.

Trust also served as a prominent motivator for this group of parents. The educational professionals communicated their trustworthiness to the parents through following through on the students' programming as depicted in the IEPs (Soodak & Erwin, 2000). The follow through on IEP goals served to assure the parents their children's needs were being met. Supporting student learning also engendered greater trust for educational professionals on the part of the parents (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). The focus for the parents of this study was on the greatest development within the context of the disability for their children. Professional educators served as a means to this end when they did all that they could to support student learning (Christenson, 2004). The professional educators interacting with the parents of this study portrayed an understanding that in order for the students to reach maximum growth they needed to interface with the families in a positive way. The result of this interaction was a growing level of trust towards the professional educators on the part of the parents. The growing level of trust was transferred to the school system as a whole and served as a motivator towards stronger family/school collaboration.

Emotional connect emerged as a vital attribute and another leading motivator for the parents. Educational professionals who connected on an emotional level with the students served to increase the parents' perception of family/school partnership. As Christenson (2004) found,

families expressed their need for educational professionals to emotionally connect with their children to believe their own participation would support their children's social, emotional, and academic development. Moreover, the parents of the study believed the educational professionals emotionally connected with their children when they demonstrated an understanding of ASD and provided the students with the necessary accommodations for success. This understanding served to build a connection between the schools and families that reinforced parents' perception towards family/school partnerships.

The parents' belief in themselves and their ability to make a difference in the educational lives of their children stood out as an important motivator for this group of parents. The parents expressed a direct connection between parental efficacy, their level of involvement and their students' success (Fan & Chen, 2001). The response of educational professionals served to reinforce the parents' concept of parental efficacy. When the teachers reacted positively to the input and interventions of the parents with their children, the parents increased their involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler et al., 2005). The parents articulated a commitment to family/school partnerships as a result of the role parental efficacy played in the family/school interactions.

The concepts of role construction, team approach, parent's knowledge, and it's the law did not emerge as strong motivators for this group of parents. Role construction appeared to be a constant underlying belief for this group of parents as expressed in their behaviors across the many contexts of their children lives. As such the parents did not articulate a focus on their role within their children's educational lives due to the children's disability. The parents shared a more global focus on their overall responsibility to support the growth and development of their children in the context of the family, school, and community. For many of these parents the

focus went beyond the school to a much greater concern for the lives of their children as expressed in the overall community. The social impact of autism as found in the definition of IDEIA (2004) perhaps guided the parents towards this greater focus in the area of role construction.

The concept of team approach did not serve as strong a position in motivating participation for this group of parents. The parents acknowledged their understanding of their legal right to participate in the IEP process (IDEIA, 2004), but almost as an afterthought. This group of parents displayed highly involved behaviors in light of their children's diagnosis. The diagnosis of autism appeared to be a greater motivator than the legal right to participate. For these parents teaming took on a sense of consultation with the parents supplying the necessary information on how their children present on the autism spectrum. This too might be a greater reflection of the complexity of the presentation of the disorder as summarized in the definition (IDEIA, 2004) than an actual statement on the motivating importance of a team approach. This analysis also framed the concept of parent knowledge. Here too parent knowledge appeared to serve a position of supporting educational professionals in understanding the very complex nature of the neuro-biological disorder of autism. The receptiveness of the educational professionals to grow in understanding was captured as strong motivating factors in the prior categories of invitation to involvement, trust, emotional connect, and parental efficacy. While the categories had the ability to serve as motivators, they also had the ability to serve as barriers against family/school partnerships. Chapter 7 discusses the parents' perception of family/school partnerships in light of barriers to collaboration.

## **7.0 REPORT OF FINDINGS: WHAT BARRIERS DO PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH ASD BELIEVE THEY ENCOUNTER IN PARTICIPATION (COLLABORATING) WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS?**

The parents of this study described the barriers against family/school partnerships in much the same way as the motivators. Hence, the categories that supported strong family/school participation in one situation stood as impenetrable walls against collaboration in others. Those categories, when acting against family/school participation, reflected Bronfenbrenner's (1992) concept of the harmful circles found within a person's environment, as well as within the individual. The categories of emotional connect, invitation to involvement, parent's knowledge, frustration, trust, and perceived life contexts appeared to serve as the greatest barriers when parents' and educational professionals' interactions moved towards Bronfenbrenner's (1992) concept of more harmful circles. Parental efficacy and team approach appeared to serve as lesser barriers. Attitudes and dispositions in all of the categories stood in the way of constructive interactions, creating negative perceptions of family/school partnerships.

Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) established the importance of a positive attitude towards families and towards the school/family relationship in order to create a constructive working environment for parents and students. When acting as barriers the characteristics of the previous categories were the reverse of those isolated by Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) to ensure the development of positive relationships. According to Ratcliff and Hunt (2009), in order to



develop positive relationships, educational professionals needed to focus on the assets of a family rather than on the perceived deficits. They needed to believe in the families' abilities to interact with their children in a supportive manner to further knowledge and skills. A commitment to communicate effectively needed to be demonstrated by the professional educators for the parents to feel invited into the educational process. Furthermore, the educational professionals needed to recognize the parents as essential partners with knowledge, concerns, and ideas that would enhance their students' skills and abilities in the learning process. These positive attributes were not a part of the categories and themes when they served as barriers.

Ultimately the lack of positive characteristics in the interactions of educational professionals and the parents emerged as a lack of connection with the parents and students. Moreover, the perceptions of the parents towards the concept of trust was hindered as a result of the many barriers that materialized through the categories of emotional connect, invitation to involvement, parent's knowledge, and frustration. The perceived life contexts of the parents of this study occupied a much greater role in their perception towards family/school partnership as a result of the prior categories. These categories emerged for this group of parents as barriers towards the forming of a constructive partnership that would acknowledge the many spheres of influence working on the children, the families, and the schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Lin & Bates, 2010).

## **7.1 EMOTIONAL CONNECT AS A BARRIER**

The concept of emotional connect emerged as an important potential barrier for constructive family/school partnerships. Parents felt prevented from engaging in a productive fashion due to a lack of emotional connect between their children and educational professionals. The two environments of home and school lacked the necessary connection to mutually accommodate the needs of the students with ASD (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The barrier of emotional connect became apparent through the themes of lack of understanding, emotional disconnect, and judgment.

### **7.1.1 Lack of Understanding**

Patrikakou et al. (2005) shared the pivotal role the school played along with the family in the development of a student. Bronfenbrenner (1992) demonstrated the more supportive the link between these two settings the better potential of supporting healthy development in the student. The interactions between the students and the environments of home and school interacted to produce the constancy and change observed in the students. The parents of this study noted lack of understanding displayed on the part of some educational professionals served as a barrier towards their collaboration. Parent B shared her perception of a principal's apparent inability to look beyond the surface of her son's presentation to observe the characteristics of his autism. This lack of understanding served to block the finding of the student's exceptionality and his right to special education services. If not for the intrusion of the primary teacher this child would have spent more time struggling to perform without services. Fortunately, this teacher willingly incurred the possible displeasure of her principal to express her concerns to the parents. The

potential motivating factors of emotional connect were observed in the teacher's interactions, as the potential barriers of emotional connect were displayed in the principal's interactions.

Parent B:        So when it came out that this principal had seen some things... his first instinct... and I think it was a personal thing of being a supervisor... he said she does this all the time... but he also said she has been right most of the time.

And so as a result he didn't know because he needed to look beyond the surface.

Parent B:        He's in the hallway... so when it became definite (*that son was exceptional*) he said he would have never thought it. So that was our biggest hurdle.

A lack of understanding was demonstrated for Parent D when educational professionals discussed perceived attributes of her son in a negative manner. The educational professionals perceptions served as a disconnect between the elements of the microsystem (e.g., the connection between the parent and the child's teacher). This disconnect hindered the parent's perception of family/school partnership (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

Parent D:        When he was in like kindergarten... they said he was backwards. I remember the teacher saying backwards. But yet he did the lead in their big play.

Parent D:        They said (child) was very agile... he was always making value judgments. Guess what that sounds like... early criticism.

Parent D: He had a little meltdown and they made him sit outside the principal's office for the entire morning kindergarten... instead of calling me.

### **7.1.2 Emotional Disconnect**

Bronfenbrenner (1992) articulated the dependency of a person's development on the influences of the multi-dimensional environments the person inhabits. Through this knowledge we come to understand the different developmental consequences that may occur depending on the interactions of the educational professionals, the parents, and the child. A student's development may be enhanced through the positive emotional connections that may arise between the student, the parent, and the educational professional. Conversely, the student's development may be hindered due to the lack of an emotional connection or what has been labeled in this study as the theme or sub-code emotional disconnect. Parent D expressed this perceived lack of emotional connection by the teacher in her unwillingness to work with Parent D's son. Parent D feared the impact on her son's development because of a teacher's emotional disconnect to her son and to the characteristics the son displayed as a result of his autism. The parent worried his social and academic development would be stymied as a result of emotional disconnect on the part of the educational professionals. This fear stood in the way of her engagement in family/school collaboration.

Parent D: He went up to the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>-grade building and he had a teacher up there... three weeks into it she decided she didn't want to teach (son) because she didn't have the background.

Parent D: In 8<sup>th</sup> grade he had a science teacher who in front of the whole class... they were doing distance/rate/time... so he is doing this in his head... it is pretty easy... she erased his paper in front of everybody because he did not show his work.

Parent D: And on top of it the first day he was in the.. you know... the in-school detention room... the teacher who was monitoring was a newer teacher... young... and she thought (son) was the bully so she wouldn't let him see the clock... she wouldn't help him with his homework... she completely did everything thinking he was the bully.

Parent D: In the meantime I get a call from a mom whose daughter is in class with son... she didn't want to be identified... she wouldn't tell me who she was... she said my daughter comes home from school everyday in tears because the teacher is making fun of son when he leaves the room.

Parent D: But now I go into the school after school and the kids the boys are probably sitting out in the hallway and I face this teacher and I say I want to know why I would get a call like this and he says well when... he looks down at his feet... when son doesn't hand in his homework I say "why am I not surprised." So it doesn't really answer the question but um I say well maybe the kids view that sarcasm as you making fun of him.

### 7.1.3 Judgment

Ratcliff and Hunt (2009) advised educational professionals to communicate to families in a manner that confirms families' thoughts and feelings. Bronfenbrenner (1992) shared effective communication acknowledged parents' primary role in the life of their children while further acknowledging the emotional connection to the children developed by educational professionals. As a result commitment to effective communication served to support the educational professionals in developing a commitment to the empowerment perspective of families. The commitment to this perspective communicated to the parents their value and significance as partners in their children's education. A disposition which judged parents' interactions stood in the way of communicating a commitment to an empowered family. Parent E shared her concern of being judged as being too involved, too committed in light of her son's disability. The potential of being judged as having too great an involvement served as a barrier for continuing involvement for Parent E.

Parent E: Yes... I am concerned they are going to be like you are way too involved in this kid's life... in what he is doing. He needs to be much more independent. He needs to be and you know and I had some problems with assignments already even at the middle school where they are not... it is not that they're not accommodating but because of the disability he doesn't always grasp the whole assignment he'll get parts of it and he'll get it home and I'm like okay what are you suppose to do and he'll um for example he has... a last year he had to write a paper and he told me it was about working... him working with dolphins and why he would

want to work with dolphins... so he wrote this beautiful paper and I get the paper back and he got a 50 on it... half credit... and I was like... it was suppose to be a persuasive paper to get someone to hire him.

Parent E: He needs detailed directions. Because when he gets home they may not necessarily be there. In high school I can see the teacher putting the homework assignment on the board but maybe never even mentioning it in class... but then he's expected to know it's there. And then bring it home and get it done and turn it in the next day.

## **7.2 INVITATION TO INVOLVEMENT AS A BARRIER**

The concept of invitation to involvement served as the strongest motivator for family/school participation for the participants of this study. The importance of invitation to involvement in the area of motivation was reflected in its ability to serve as a great barrier as well. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) found the psychological factor of invitation to involvement was dependent on the parents' perceptions on the openness of the invitation. A lack of a perception of being wanted to engage in a full partnership stood as a barrier for the parents of this study. The themes that emerged under this concept were: "standoffish," negative outreach, and lack of communication.

### 7.2.1 “Standoffish”

Lo (2008) found in an investigation of Chinese parents of children with special needs that invitation to involvement played a major role in the parents’ participation in IEP meetings. The parents reported the constraints they encountered in their attempts to fulfill their role in the IEP process. Behaviors of the educational professionals on the day of an IEP served as a further barrier to invitation to involvement. Lo (2008) observed professionals come late or leave early from the meetings. This behavior communicated to parents that the professionals were only attempting to fulfill an obligation. Furthermore it communicated to the parents that their presence was not valued and their involvement was not a crucial component of the IEP process. Parent C and Parent B communicated a similar message being received through the “standoffish” manner displayed by educational professionals. Neither parent expressed a strong impression of being invited into the process for the benefit of their children. The lack of interaction with the concerned educational professional stood as a barrier to family/school collaboration.

Parent C: (I) don’t interact much with this year’s teacher.

Parent B: That was pretty cut and dry. Where we had... and it was me... more than my husband... there’s the principal who is not there any more... and he is one who did not like a lot of labels to begin with.

Parent B: It was a matter of trying to get through his personality.

Parent B: Um short and sweet... there’s not a whole lot of... The first night I met him it was a special education open house and it was the first time we were invited... and we met him.

Parent B: Um definitely different... more reserved. However she has told me several times about his different ways of thinking.



### 7.2.2 Negative Outreach

Feuerstein (2000) found the attributes of a school conveyed to parents an invitation to involvement. He found that contacting parents on just one factor, such as behavior, did not lead to greater interaction on the part of parents. The theme negative outreach emerged from a perception of the parents that contact was limited to just one or two factors, which were negative in nature. Parent D shared how a teacher would raise questions on a perceived negative attribute of her child in front of others. Parent E also shared how all contacts to her came out of a need to communicate a negative occurrence. Feuerstein (2000) established the notifying of parents across the spectrum of information disseminated by a school (e.g., behavior, grades, general information, requests for volunteering, school events) led to the greatest degree of parent engagement. Conversely, the more narrow the range of communication the greater the barrier to parents' belief that their involvement was consistently welcomed and valued.

Parent D: So what happened in second grade... the teacher at meetings might say to me in front of four or five other parents... she says to me... (Child) is not a very patient child. Does it run in your family? I looked at her and immediately... my gosh... I never had issues with (child) and patience and I said to her... and the other parents were appalled.

Parent D: I would volunteer to come in every week... which I thought I would be volunteering in the classroom... but she would send me to the aid room. Until there was a crisis. And she say... you have to get (child) to finish these. And there would be a stack of 15 worksheets that he wouldn't do. It was nowhere in the IEP.

Parent E: Like I said the school district he was in for first through third grade every interaction involved them contacting me because there was a problem I needed to come in for a meeting... they were concerned about his academics... they were concerned about his behaviors because he would have these meltdowns... it was very... very I would say very negative from the beginning of first grade when his first grade teacher told me he may be a little behind because he didn't have Kindergarten curriculum in our district and its like ok.

### **7.2.3 Lack of Communication**

Coots (1998) determined a strong correlation between home and school resulted in greater parent engagement. Information through communication shared openly served as the bedrock to this connection between home and school. As a result, parents found a higher degree of invitation to involvement when communication consistently occurred. Equally, a lack of communication proved to be a barrier for parents' perception of invitation to involvement. Parent C shared his desire to have an opportunity to communicate solely with the special education teacher. He felt the size of the group served as a an excess of voices with the message being lost in the crowd. The attempt to communicate in a large group stymied productive communication for this parent.

Parent D expressed the perception that lack of communication served as a great barrier to her husband's participation. The father could only attend a meeting if it occurred on certain days due to the fact his employment was several states away. In the situation she shared the husband was able to arrange a period of time when he could attend a meeting. The principal, however, was concerned with the lead teacher's ability to attend. Parent D pointed out the lack of

communication on the part of the lead teacher, which had already served as a great barrier for this parent. Focusing on the lead teacher rather than the husband appeared to strengthen this parent's perception her presence and her husband's was irrelevant to the educational professionals. Parent E shared her fear of communication decreasing as her son advanced in grades. This fear was based on her professional knowledge of family/school partnerships in later grades. Lack of communication was perceived as a barrier to family/school collaboration for these parents.

Parent C: Well I would... my major thing is communications between the special education and the parents. I know that in order that the teacher I wouldn't mind having just the special education teacher there. Too many people were at the meeting... I would like to just meet with a smaller group. Before when we said this is oh by the way he's doing ok with this. I would be more apt to say after the plan here's where we are at... what has to be done here... some of the pitfalls to what we have done that we have improved on... and say ok got him to do this lets hear that so we can incorporate that at home.

Parent D: Don't you know I go in earlier in that week and the principal in front of everybody says to me that this particular teacher this senior teacher can't make it to the um the meeting because she is going to be out of town or something and I looked at him and I said you know while I would like to be very accommodating the point is she has not made it to any meeting that we have had so far

and my husband is going to be there. So she can be there on Friday... on Saturday... if she can be there before Sunday at 4:00 we will be there to meet with her and the team. But we will not have this meeting next week because my husband was going to be out of town.

Parent E: I anticipate both from my personal and professional experience that as the kids get older there is a lack of communication. You know a... at the elementary level that I could pop into the principal's office... I felt more comfortable doing that. The teachers would meet with me... you know and everything... now it is kind of like I go to the counselor and I email teachers so there's not that face to face. I am very concerned going into the high school that if I don't and I hate to and I'm trying very hard to not be a helicopter parent but if I don't take that initiative they are not going to... they are not going to communicate with me.

### **7.3 PARENT'S KNOWLEDGE AS A BARRIER**

The concept of parent's knowledge emerged from the literature review in the areas of student invite to parents, teachers engagement of parents in the total learning experience, families and schools forming collaborative learning environments, and the dictates of special education law (Christenson, 2004; Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; IDEIA, 2004; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Throughout, the knowledge of parents appeared as a potential motivator, as well as a potential

barrier to family/school partnership. In the case of barrier to family/school partnership the knowledge of the principles of special education incorporated in IDEIA (2004) appeared to be positioned as the greatest barrier under parent's knowledge.

### **7.3.1 Knowledge of Special Education: IDEIA, 2004**

The theme knowledge of special education: IDEIA, 2004 materialized as a result of parents expressed concerns as they attempted to navigate the IEP process (Fish, 2006, 2008; Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002; Ivey, 2004; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). A lack of knowledge alienated Parent D from the special education process. Parent D expressed a lack of knowledge of the IEP process, in effect relegating her to a nominal role in the determination of services for her son. In the situation she shared, her son had a gifted individualized education program (GIEP), which was served under special education, utilizing all of the same forms and processes. During the period the parent shared, her son had been receiving services under a GIEP for several years. At the time in question, her son was struggling with time management and organizational skills as a result of his disability. It would have been appropriate to discuss those issues during the yearly meeting for his GIEP. Moreover, the scheduling of a re-evaluation would have been an appropriate conclusion of the discussion. Sections 670, 671, 672, and 673 of IDEIA (2004) mandates the responsibility of the state and federal government to disseminate the necessary information for parents of students with disabilities to engage in the education of their children. The school district needed to ensure the parent had the necessary knowledge to be a full participant in the IEP process (IDEIA, 2004). As a result her lack of knowledge of special education processes served as a barrier to her perception of family/school collaboration.

Parent D: But in the meantime I don't think I was fully aware for some reason of what an IEP was because I would have thought by now that the school would say to me oh okay lets have an IEP meeting.

Parent D: So what ended up happening is we had that meeting and they just said he really needs to have all kind of like up unto this point I didn't even know he could have all these um evaluations. So of course that's when I signed for him to have all these evaluations and everything so this is... you know... the fall of 5<sup>th</sup> grade year.

Parent D: So after that I... we go to a meeting and I get an advocate... by that point whose is a dual exceptionality advocate... gifted and whatever else. So don't you know we go to a meeting in January and I think it's the IEP meeting... I still don't know that I am suppose to be signing anything like you know what I mean... I still don't know what the whole process is.

Parent B also struggled with the barrier that occurred due to her lack of knowledge of the special education process. Her son was found ineligible for ESY. Parent B did not know that she had the right to be a part of the decision (IDEIA, 2004). She was told he was ineligible, rather than being included in the conversation to determine his eligibility. Moreover, she was told his eligibility was determined by where on the autism spectrum her son was and if the impact was social or academic. Her lack of knowledge proved to be a barrier to her son receiving the services he was entitled to under IDEIA (2004). While it could be argued the district served the student by providing a camp program, a review of the IEP document painted a different picture. The camp program was not included within the IEP, so there were no rights to

individualized designed instruction during the summer program. Maintenance of social skills may have taken more intensive services through the summer months, which would have been determined by the development of IEP goals. Once again the lack of knowledge of special education processes served as a barrier for family/school partnership.

Parent B: He's not eligible for ESY.

Parent B: They do a camp for three weeks... it's a camp... two or three days a week and there are a couple of different camps. One of the little ones here goes to the elementary school for their camp as opposed to going to (*another school*) and compared to going to ESY... so there are different things.

Parent B: And it depends where they are on the spectrum or what their issues are whether they get camp or ESY. It dictates how much ESY too.

#### **7.4 FRUSTRATION AS A BARRIER**

The concept of frustration as a barrier was much more difficult to isolate in the literature review. In many ways frustration was the antithesis of such concepts as trust, invitation to involvement, and parent's knowledge. When a parent felt welcomed into the process, when they developed a level of trust, and felt their knowledge was being heard and accepted they did not feel frustrated with the educational process. Soodak and Erwin (2000) found parents expressed a more positive partnership with educational professionals once trust was formed. Frustration appeared to inhabit a place within the harmful circles found in the student's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). In light of this understanding, frustration would then serve to keep a positive partnership

from being developed. The themes of lack of support for parents and lack of support for students emerged under the concept of frustration as a barrier.

#### **7.4.1 Lack of Support for Parents**

Anderson and Minke (2007) concluded teachers' attitudes towards parents played a significant role in parental involvement. Teachers needed to communicate a belief in the importance of parent involvement in the ultimate success of students. Unfortunately, Epstein (1986) found that not all teachers wanted the help and support of parents. Some teachers expressed a belief that parental involvement jeopardized the teacher's professional status. Moreover, Epstein (1986) found this pattern of behavior was built on a negative expectation of the parent's ability. Parent D expressed a perception of being held in disregard by a teacher instrumental in developing the necessary special education services for her child. As a result of this perception the parent shared great frustration in the special education processes. In the end, this level of frustration became a barrier for her involvement in collaborating with the school. The end result was a transfer to a cyber charter school in order to avoid her perception that collaboration with the school district was unattainable.

Parent D:        So I am dealing with these like um you know its almost like I don't have anybody being there for me and we keep getting side tracked on getting him help.

Parent D:        So she didn't even really take it out on him as much... cause he told me that he remembers her always um... um trying to give him skittles... but she was horrid to me.



#### **7.4.2 Lack of Supports for Students**

Bronfenbrenner (1992) argued for the centralized location of students in all the systems that bear impact on their lives. Accordingly, the home, school, and community coming together as one would play a major role in students reaching success in the classroom. Christenson (2004) emphasized the need for quality in the interactions between families and educational professionals in order to support this coming together. The parents communicated a deep frustration when educational professionals did not demonstrate what they perceived as a positive attitude towards the families. Moreover, the parents' interactions were strained when they perceived a lack of support for their children. Parent D shared how some of the educational professionals responsible for her son's education felt he should not have an IEP. This lack of support was seen by this parent as an unwillingness to understand the complexities of ASD and how it presents across environment and time.

Furthermore, the son experienced bullying in the eighth grade, which she believed was left unaddressed when he attempted to report the incidents. Communication with others was a weakness for this student and was often discussed by the team. Parent D shared her frustration with the educational professional who she perceived did not delve more deeply into the son's attempted communication. Greater frustration arose when the son reacted to the bullying in an aggressive fashion and served what the parent believed was a greater consequence than the other students. Parent D responded to this incident as further evidence of unwillingness to understand her son and what he was going through. Her great frustration stood as an impenetrable barrier to engagement in family/school collaboration.

Parent D:      Some in the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade building decided that you know they  
                     didn't agree that he should have an IEP... he was just doing this.

Parent D: (Son) started getting like made fun of in 8<sup>th</sup> grade... not made fun of... he was being beaten... like they would try to push him down the stairs in 8<sup>th</sup> grade for about three weeks. And he tried to tell... he tried to get away... stay away from the kids... he tried he told them to stay away from him... he went to a teacher... but the teacher didn't do anything about it. And then he also um ended up cracking a kid in the eye... so when he punched this kid in the eye obviously like everybody's attention... you know he got everybody's attention... he ended up with 3 in-school suspensions.

Parent D: They tried to push him down the stairs... they um all admitted to doing this to (son)... they only got one-day in school and (son) got 3 days.

Parent D: I thought they never really... um... they never really... I think suitably supported... you know they would put someone who didn't really... didn't understand autism a whole lot.

## **7.5 TRUST AS A BARRIER**

The concept of trust was seen as a great motivator in the development of family/school partnerships (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, et al., 2005; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Conversely, trust served as a barrier towards reaching out to collaborating with educational professionals. In the literature review trust as a barrier emerged as the theme of low trust.

### 7.5.1 Low Trust

According to Adams and Christenson (1998, 2000) trust developed on different levels ranging from high to low. Low trust was marked by a lack of belief in one another, causing both sides to interpret behaviors in a negative light. Parents in low trust situations translated the behaviors of educational professionals as untrustworthy. Moreover, parents and educational professionals in low-trust relationships tended to react emotionally to the behaviors of students. This reaction became a barrier to effective dialogue and resolution of the situation based on trust. Parent E shared her low-trust for some educational professionals due to her perception of their unwillingness to accommodate her son. Parent B shared that low trust tainted her perception of how a teacher handled a bullying situation with her son. This is further reflected in her lack of belief in educational professionals to engage in behaviors to help in the fostering of friendships. As a result Parent E and Parent B communicated lack of trust stood as a barrier for family/school collaboration.

Parent E: I have had problems with individual teachers though... being unwilling to accommodate for him.

Parent B: That I am not sure I know that. In third grade before we knew our son is on the spectrum... he had a lot of issues with teasing and bullying and then unfortunately the teacher saw some things and she thought they were just playing. Like... oh I am going to touch you and calling him weird and strange.

Parent B: As far as fostering friendships... I know in the playground they kind of don't. They let the kids... they are not sitting there trying to foster friendships.

Parent D shared her willingness to think less of an educational professional based on her lack of trust. As Adams and Christenson (2000) found, Parent D was stalled in a connection that under recognized positive behaviors and overemphasized negative behaviors. This level of low-trust led Parent D to refrain from engagement in involvement activities at the school. Parent D's perception was one of distrust for the behaviors of the educational professionals occupied in the education of her son. These relationships were interpreted from a negative viewpoint. Low trust served as a great barrier for family/school collaboration for Parent D.

Parent D: You know he was being made fun of by a teacher in forth grade... a parent called me to tell me. Third grade in the middle of the third grade I heard the word autism from the psychologist. But they said they couldn't do anything because they didn't know anything about it. And so the very first person we went to said (son) was very endearing and it was probably the second grade teacher's problem. He had the second grade teacher for third grade too. So in third grade I hear this in the middle of the school year... I take (son) and they say it sounds like the teacher was real difficult. I said she is... she was not willing to bend a lot.

Parent D: So after school started then and they actually met (son)... that thesis paper meant nothing. And what ended up happening is they started wanting to have meetings with me... but the senior teacher never showed up and I'm thinking why is she so... you know... what is the deal with her.

## 7.6 PERCEIVED LIFE CONTEXTS AS A BARRIER

Perceived life contexts were defined as the self-perceived time and energy, as well as the self-perceived knowledge and skills to engage in family/school partnerships (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Parent C questioned his ability to balance the demands of being the family's provider while staying engaged actively in his son's education. He shared his attempts to stay involved in spite of the educational professions' perceptions that he was less involved. His perceived life contexts stood as a barrier to his involvement, but his recognition of this constraint and his willingness to find other ways to connect caused it to be less of a barrier.

Parent C: It's just that she's at home... she's dealing with a lot of the stuff. I'm at work... she's at home... so for the most part she's doing most of the interaction.

Parent C: Another thing and then I'll go back. What I have done with Elaine the third grade teacher... the first teacher (*the one he had when he was diagnosed*) and now the fourth grade teacher. I'll continue on why this is my whole theory on this whenever we talked about this... one of us has to stay at home for the mentoring... to bring the child up... rather than working... you know both of us working not having the interaction... so when I talked to each one of the teachers... even though they may not perceive me with being involved in the school... I have always asked them if there is something that they see that we need to work in conjunction with them to please let us know. You know what we are experiencing

at home and we have to work together to make him the best person possible.

Parent D experienced perceived life contexts as a much greater barrier than Parent C. In the situation of Parent D she was constrained by the impact of her family responsibilities on her time and energy (Bartel, 2010). The parent's own medical needs stood as a barrier as engagement tended to heighten her perception of her depression. Parent D expressed a need for the educational professionals to develop parental involvement that accommodated her life contexts. Without this occurring Parent D believed her child did not reap the benefits of his parent's involvement and his teachers' efforts. Perceived life contexts stood as a great barrier to family/school collaboration.

Parent D: And I think that some of this time we were building a house... selling a house... building a house... I ended up with shingles. Um you know that my husband is out of town... so everything is... so it was just kind of on me all the time and I never felt like I was getting anyone to step up.

Parent D: But I'm thinking what is this and I am like I am clinically depressed and I am almost suicidal. Um I don't know how I am getting all this pushback from everybody that I thought was suppose to be there to help your child through school. So now I am being considered hostile on top of it because I won't change a meeting you know because I'm being you know difficult is what they are calling me.

## 7.7 PARENTAL EFFICACY AS A BARRIER

Parental efficacy was a barrier when the parents struggled with their belief in their ability to make a difference in their children's educational life (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992). Parent B shared how the development of the IEP took a period much greater than she believed it should take. Her lack of belief in her ability to make a difference kept her from encouraging the team for a quicker turnaround on the IEP meeting. Her acceptance of the educational professionals' schedule stood as a barrier to her engaging fully in a family/school partnership.

Parent B: Around October... it took a while to get the actual IEP. OK we knew we were going to get an IEP... but it also took us a while.

Parent D communicated parental efficacy stood as a barrier when she believed that ultimately her engaging in collaboration would not make a difference. In the situations she shared she first attempted to engage but retreated based on her sense of not making a difference. Moreover, Parent D utilized defensive posturing when she believed she was not able to reach her desired outcome. The concept of parental efficacy served as a barrier to family/school collaboration for Parent D.

Parent D: I said why do you say something like this in front of other parents. Even so it's not a helpful comment. Never met me... first time we ever met. So I said no you're the first... I said is there something... ten days into school year... is there something I need to be made aware of.

Parent D: What happened... so my husband is going to be gone for two weeks and he is leaving on a Sunday afternoon... even so I said we

all talked amongst... not that I talked to people a lot... but we all decided is that this um Thursday afternoon was going to be when we were all going to meet because (husband) was going to have to go out of town for two weeks and there was no way we could wait to meet... plus he was going to be at the meeting.

## **7.8 TEAM APPROACH AS A BARRIER**

Lo (2008) shared parents had a need for educational professionals to behave in a manner that communicated an inclusive team approach. Parent B and Parent C shared a perception in which the team approach did not appear to be inclusive. Parent B spoke of an ESY meeting that was held based on the mandates of the law. Earlier discussion of this meeting in 7.3.1 knowledge of special education: IDEIA, 2004, demonstrated the message was conveyed on the student's eligibility for ESY services. The parent believed she was not included within the decision-making as intended by IDEIA (2004). This team approach fits the description of a consultation with an expert delivering the information to the parent rather than the collaboration defined within special education law (Heward, 2009). Team approach stood as a barrier for Parent B's perception of family/school partnership.

Parent B:        There was a mini meeting at the end of the year... extended school year... the school has to have it (*an ESY meeting*).

Parent C also discussed an IEP meeting that resembled a consultation more than collaboration. The educational professionals sought information from the parent in order for the professionals to make a determination of eligibility for special education services. IDEIA stated



clearly parents must be equal partners in the special education processes of evaluation, eligibility, determinations, individualized education programs, and educational placements (IDEIA, Section 614, 2004). Parent C was kept from participating fully in family/school collaboration by a team approach based on the concept of consultation.

Parent C: I think basically the IEP process was they had a procedure to go through (*which*) they normally go through and we went through that procedure. Our involvement in the process was (*to*) give them the information so they could determine whether he's... number one... on the spectrum and number two... how far on the spectrum and where is he on the spectrum... so they can determine (*what services to give him*). At that point what assistive programs we could potentially have.

## **7.9 SUMMARY OF THE BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED IN THE PARTICIPATION WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS**

The preceding categories served as barriers for parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships. The category of emotional connect served as the greatest barrier against involvement for this group of parents. The parents expressed a strong need for the educational professionals to connect with their children in such a manner as to allow their children to reach their greatest potential. This need reflected Bronfenbrenner's (1992) concept of the environment acting on the student as the student acts on the environment causing the constancy and change that occurs over a lifetime. The parents shared a strong desire for the

environment of the school to act on their children in a way that honored their uniqueness due to their ASD. In order for this to occur, educational professionals needed to understand the characteristics of ASD; they needed to emotionally connect with the students; and to reserve judgment on parents' interactions. This knowledge emerged in the themes of lack of understanding, emotional disconnect, and judgment.

The parents believed a lack of understanding on the part of educational professionals stood as the greatest barrier under emotional connect. The parents of this study articulated a perception of educational professionals not understanding the characteristics displayed by children with ASD. This lack of understanding caused the parents to question the ability of a school to provide the necessary services to make a difference in the lives of their children. As seen in the literature review, the schools play a pivotal role in the development of students, bringing legitimacy to the parents' concern (Patrikakou et al., 2005). Furthermore, this concern stood as a barrier against the parents engaging actively in family/school collaboration.

Parents also raised concerns that their children's development would be hindered by the interactions of the educational professionals, the parents, and the children in the themes of emotional disconnect and judgment. Parents shared their perceptions of the teachers' unwillingness to work with or understand the possible constraints of the characteristics of ASD. This perceived unwillingness communicated to the parents a lack of belief on the part of the educational professionals of the value of the parents' knowledge of ASD (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Furthermore, this perceived unwillingness stood in the way of families developing a sense of empowerment in the area of the school. As such the themes of emotional disconnect and judgment served as barriers for the parents of this study for engaging in family/school partnerships.

The concept of invitation to involvement also had the potential to be a great barrier against family/school partnership. In chapter 7 the parents shared the immense importance of invitation to involvement in their decisions to engage in collaborative behaviors. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) found parents reacted based on their perceptions of the openness of the invitation. The parents articulated the importance of invitation to involvement to motivate was inversely proportionate to its ability to serve as a barrier against their collaboration. This occurred when parents perceived a standoffish manner on the part of educational professionals, when they perceived the outreach to be negative in nature, and when they perceived a lack of communication. This led to the themes of standoffish, negative outreach, and lack of communication.

The theme “standoffish” was addressed in Lo’s (2008) investigation of Chinese parents of students with special needs and their interactions with educational professionals. The parents’ perceptions were based on their belief that educational professionals interactions were based on a sense of obligation only. The parents of this study felt a distance between themselves and the professional educators responsible for their children. They shared a sense of not being able to get past some professional educators’ personalities to form a relationship. This lack of being able to connect created a barrier to their possible collaboration with the staff. Moreover, Feuerstein (2000) found the overall attributes of the school, as reflected in the behavior of the staff, conveyed to parents how much or how little they were welcomed into the school system. The parents of this study shared stories of professional educators who contacted them for behavioral problems only. The parents perceived they were only welcomed into the system when they needed to deal with a problem. This limited outreach served as a great barrier to family/school participation for these parents.

Lack of communication was also a theme under invitation to involvement when this category served as a barrier. Parents expressed communication did not occur consistently, leading them to believe their voices were unwelcomed by the professional educators. Parents perceived their presence was not wanted or needed, as communication was not shared across all the possible domains in which a school usually communicates (Coots, 1998). Hence, lack of communication served as a barrier against family/school partnership for the parents of this study.

Parent's knowledge of the processes of special education also served as a barrier for family/school partnerships for this group of parents. As noted in the literature review the parents struggled with the processes and procedures as they attempted to navigate the necessary services for their children (Fish, 2006, 2008; Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002). While this theme stood as a barrier, the parents did not appear fully aware of the extent of the barrier. Without the necessary knowledge of their rights under special education law the parents appeared more willing to accept a more limited role. The parents shared stories of decisions made for services rendered that did not speak to the level of involvement specified under IDEIA (2004). Further questioning and analysis of the IEP documents reinforced the accuracy of the interpretation of the data. As such parent's knowledge stood as a much greater barrier against family/school partnership than perceived by the parents of this study.

The concepts of frustration, trust, and perceived life contexts appeared to serve lesser roles as barriers against family/school partnerships across the participants. However, for parents who spoke to these concepts they appeared to serve as overwhelming barriers. Parent D expressed frustration as a great barrier for her engagement in collaborative behaviors. The parent shared a perception of the school and the educational professionals as not having the attributes that would welcome a family into a partnership (Anderson & Minke, 2007;

Christenson, 2004; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). She believed the school system communicated a message of disregard for her knowledge and skills in light of her son's ASD. Trust was also perceived as a great barrier when it reflected low trust between the parents and the school (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000). The parents shared the concept of trust emerged when they perceived an unwillingness on the part of educational professionals to accommodate their children based on their disability. Whether the accommodations were academic or social, the parents believed the educational professionals were unwilling to engage in the necessary behaviors to support their children. While perceived life contexts also played a lesser role for many of the parents of this study, the parents who perceived it as a barrier expressed it as a greater obstacle. Both parents focused on their self-perceived time and energy to engage in family/school partnerships (Walker et al., 2005). Balancing the needs of their families in light of having a child with a disability, as well as the demands of everyday life served to place greater demands on time and energy. These greater demands for one of the parents elevated to such a level as to place her own health in jeopardy. The other parent who spoke to this concept managed it in such a way as to find ways to counteract the potential limiting impact on his engagement in family/school collaboration.

The concept of parental efficacy appeared to serve a very limited role as a barrier against family/school participation. This may have been a reflection of this group's involvement level across the community of services for children with ASD. The parents of this study displayed behaviors that nurtured and supported the development of efficacy skills (Eccles & Harold, 1993). The one parent, who shared a story coded under parental efficacy as a barrier, was new to special education as her son had just been evaluated and deemed exceptional under IDEIA (2004). As such, this parent was just developing the necessary skills to support her son's journey

in all the areas impacted by his having ASD. The other parent relayed stories from the early periods of her son's life prior to his diagnosis and her developing understanding of the characteristics and traits of ASD. She had not had the opportunity at this point to develop the efficacy skills that later became the foundation of her work in the field of ASD services. Nonetheless, at the point and time when parental efficacy served as a barrier for these two parents it impeded both of their interactions with professional educators, standing in the way of family/school collaboration.

The concept of team approach did not serve as a strong barrier against family/school participation in and of itself. This concept joined with others to increase the parents' perceived alienation from collaboration with professional educators (Heward, 2009). The parents shared a sense of being novices receiving consultation services from professionals rather than equal participants in the IEP process (IDEIA, 2004). This approach when coupled with the preceding concepts of emotional connect, invitation to involvement, parent's knowledge, frustration, trust, perceived life contexts, and parental efficacy appeared to stand as a barrier against proficient family/school collaboration. While these categories had the ability to serve as barriers and as motivators towards family/school partnerships, they also helped to describe the relations that arise between parents and professional educators. In chapter 8 these concepts serve to frame how parents of students with ASD describe their relationships that arise out of their participation with educational professionals

**8.0 REPORT OF FINDINGS: HOW DO PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH ASD  
DESCRIBE THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARISE OUT OF THEIR PARTICIPATION  
(COLLABORATING) WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS?**

The parents of this study described their relationships with educational professionals based on their interactions due to their children having ASD. Their involvement in the school not only encompassed the possible everyday interactions of all parents, but the additional interactions as a result of their children receiving special education services. The legal aspect of special education mandates participation on the part of parents whose children are receiving services. These interactions are now a result of not only the rights but also the responsibilities as laid out in IDEIA (2004). Moreover, the parents of this study displayed characteristics of engagement in order to support their children in the optimum growth and development possible within the constraints of their children having ASD.

These parents perhaps displayed greater engagement than found within the overall category of parents dealing with children with ASD. These parents displayed by virtue of their membership in a parent support group a belief in behaviors that are characteristic of collaboration. The parents expressed the importance of the group within their lives and the lives of their children. As a result, the parents utilized the model of the parent support group to frame their interactions and the development of the resulting relationships with the educational

professionals in the lives of their children. By utilizing a model of active engagement the parents placed themselves in a greater position for constructive collaboration.

## **8.1 PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: EMOTIONAL CONNECT**

When speaking of relationships that emerged from the concept of emotional connect parents communicated the themes of connected and unconnected. Parents described their relations to educational professionals in the context of connected as being appreciative due to the support given to their children. This supportive relationship with their children served to pull them into a collaborative relationship with the educational professional. Relationships formed when parents perceived the theme of unconnected appeared to be strained. In this case, parents perceived negative interactions with their children that influenced the development of a negative relationship between the parent and all other professionals within the school.

### **8.1.1 Connected**

Parent E spoke highly of educational professionals who provided aid to her son when he experienced difficulty with his anxiety. Their care and concern for her son became a foundation for her to develop a relationship that connected her to them in much the same manner as they connected with her son. Christenson (2004) reinforced this concept of strong relationships developing as a result of educational professionals focusing on the social and academic



development of a child. This parent's perception of the relationship formed with her child became a basis for strong family/school collaboration.

Parent E: In the classroom it's a frustration where (he) has some physical signs are... he makes a fist with his hand and actually hits his head a little bit with it... he has a tendency to pull at his hair and not last year now... granted we are only a few months into eighth grade but last year seventh grade... he didn't have this in years prior... he would actually start tear up from the stress and anxiety and when he was younger he would have meltdowns and breakdowns... he would just start crying. They had a very difficult time trying to consol him and getting... a lot of that is the anxiety that he feels... he doesn't think he is doing perfectly... the frustration starts kicking in.

Parent E: Last year the school counselor set up a lunch bunch for him. Once a month... or every three weeks... he would go in with his best friend and they have one other boy who would go and they get to have lunch with the counselor. They get to play a game and get to hang out and talk... so we haven't push a whole lot on the socialization... he has social skills for the most part.

Parent E: In the middle school... uh... their the lead special ed. teacher is the intermediate and he bonded so even though he was only receiving you know accommodations every afternoon and it wasn't even in the accommodations... every afternoon he would go by the special

ed. office room and say hi to her... she would check again if he was having a rough day with... were he was feeling a lot of anxiety and stress... she would even walk him back to a classroom sometimes to get clarification to help explain assignments or homework with him... kind of work with him.

Parent E: The middle school he has another teacher... its not actually... it's the computer teacher... it's not even a special ed. teacher... but they really bonded last year. And she has told him... he'll stop by her office after at the end of the school day... just to say hi... um she's also told him that if anytime during the day that she... he starts getting stressed... he starts you know some of his obsessions... compulsions... hitting the head... you know wanting to cry... he is allowed to tell the teacher that he needs to go see her... and she goes even if I'm in class teaching or if my door's closed she goes just knock and I'll come over and I'll talk to him. We can talk and get through it and everything.

Parent E: So... that was another nice thing about the school... that there was that interaction where he was able to kind of identify a teacher that... and they kind of identified each other rather than being forced together. And um the teacher... other classroom teachers... are very willing for him to... okay (son) is getting upset... he needs to go and get... take a drink... and he can go see her or whatever. So again that was another great thing for a parent.

### 8.1.2 Unconnected

Parent D perceived professional educators as being unwilling to understand or provide the needed assistance to her son. This parent responded by communicating a sense of detachment from her son's school district. The relationships that emerged due to emotional connect appeared to be contentious and fractured. The parent shared an inability to connect with the educational professionals in order to ensure the delivery of special education services. Furthermore, her lack of a constructive relationship caused her to believe her child was not receiving any productive educational services. The lack of developing a constructive relationship resulted in the parent removing the child from the school district and utilizing the services of a cyber charter school.

Parent D: Making a bigger deal out of things. Maybe he was afraid to ask to leave the room. So we went through second and third grade with nothing. Same teacher. They did something called looping. She convinced me it was a better idea that for her to keep (child) because she knew him. But she was like very negative.

Parent D: So don't you know I wind up having a meeting with only 2 of the 3 teachers. So the first teacher was... I don't know... kind of a younger guy... don't know how many years he has taught... but as it turned out he wasn't like good with (son) at all. Even after he got the IEP... I'll tell you what happened. The next teacher was a first year teacher. She had done her thesis on Asperger's syndrome so everything was going to be okay... she said to me. I said you know what... I really don't mean any disrespect... but you haven't

had (son) yet. Because he was really... they were calling him an enigma. We never had a student like him before and I'm thinking to myself what am I... what kind of child do we have here. You know and I kept thinking the whole time that we can't be that different... like there is no way. We are not that unique... not that different.

Parent D: I think by this time (son) was the talk of the district... there was no just talking amongst the teachers anymore or just in the teacher lounge... now it was like this and what happened was is that the whole time I just wanted (son) to have services... I just wanted him to have help. I wouldn't even go so far as to say services... just help him. Like what are you here for as educators if you can't help the most needed children.

Parent D: They think the child is just being a brat. You know people outside just think it is bad parenting... bad child.

Parent D: Well she thought he was being... you know disrespectful... so she started yelling at him. And he thought... he told me that he thought it was funny because she just flipped out he said. So then she took him into the hall and she said she was going to do everything in her power to give him a detention.

Parent D: That day I got a call from the principal... and he says you need to come pick up (son)... he's hysterical. And I'm like what... he says... I'm afraid to put him on the bus.

Parent E also reacted to a school district by removing her son and moving to another district. The parent shared a perception of the possible surfacing of a contentious relationship between her and the school district based on her interactions with professional educators.

Parent E:        That district was less willing to accommodate... the teachers were less wiling to accommodate... they waned to push for special education placement... they were really... really pushing.

## **8.2     PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: INVITATION TO INVOLVEMENT**

Invitation to involvement helped to mold the relationships between many of the parents and the respective educational professionals working with their children. In the instance of invitation to involvement the parents communicated a sense of friendly or unfriendly relations as a result of their interactions. Parents perceived a friendly relationship when they felt acknowledged and valued by the educational professionals (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005). An unfriendly relationship appeared to develop when the parents perceived the openness of an invitation to be lacking. Some of the parents perceived unwillingness on the part of educational professionals to engage in collaboration with the parents. The themes of friendly and unfriendly are captured in the words of the parents below.

### 8.2.1 Friendly

The parents expressed the development of a friendly relationship with those they perceived as placing their children's needs first. The home visit of a teacher communicated to this parent a desire to understand the son in all of his environments (Lin & Bates, 2010). This willingness served as the foundation of the evolution of a friendly relationship between the parent and the educator. Another parent shared the story of a teacher who advocated for the student in order to ensure his needs would be addressed. Her willingness to put the needs of the student before her own needs caused this parent to describe her relationship in a positive light. Parent E shared a feeling of comfort for the educational professionals supporting her child in the day to day functioning of the school. These relationships spoke to a belief in being welcomed into the school and served as a strong foundation for family/school collaboration.

Parent C: We had the teacher over for dinner... last year's teacher.

Parent D: So he has this one on one with her. It's the craziest thing. Two weeks ago I ran into her at Ross Park Mall... she was wonderful. She was fairly new and she knew they were not handling things properly... but didn't know how much she could say. Elementary school... and she would say you need to sue the school district... he's not getting what he needs.

Parent E: But for the most part I feel very... very comfortable.

### 8.2.2 Unfriendly

An unfriendly relationship developed for some parents when analyzed in the area of invitation to involvement. This appeared to occur when parents' perceived the educational professionals as not valuing the parents' participation (Feuerstein, 2000). One parent shared how the educational professional was not willing to accommodate the needs of her son based on his 504-service agreement. For the other parent the perception emerged from the interactions between the educational professionals and the parent. In this situation the parent believed the interactions were constrained by the school's interpretation of her behavior. The staff had come to express a belief in the parent displaying hostile behavior. In both cases an unfriendly relationship developed between the parents and the school staff.

Parent E: Like I said... I had a couple of teachers here and there that were not as willing to accommodate. I did have a teacher last year... on seventh grade that was... we had some serious problems and that was a teacher issue for the most part.

Parent D: And she went oh no... very condescending. And I found out that a lot of the teachers were condescending... one thing... as if they knew that they really didn't know... like I think the one thing I found instead of bringing me in and making me apart of the team like who knows the child more than the mom. I was not defensive with (child) I wanted to find how they could best help him. I was always aware that they have 24 other students.

Parent D: Immediately before me... you know... they had a son a year or two older... they just jumped ship. As soon as that kind of thing

happened... it was a private school... you know... so um... I don't think any because they just really made it so difficult.

Parent D: It's the first time I am talking to the Director of Special Ed. She called me. Somehow I almost think she contacted me before... um they... um... because I remember her having this conversation... saying to me we have never had such a hostile situation between a teacher and a parent. And I'm going... I don't even know where you are getting this word hostile. I said the hostility is completely on the other end. I said we have a teacher who was not showing up at anything and then she is trying to dictate how the meeting is going to be held based on her schedule alone... when this is like fifteen people now involved. And at least of all... my husband and I. So I remember having this very first conversation with her... were bizarre at best. And I was already... never even met her... and she was already you know siding with it seemed um (the teacher).

### **8.3 PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: TRUST**

The literature review demonstrated the importance of trust to the development of long-lasting relationships between parents and educational professionals (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel et al., 2005; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). The parents



of this study articulated the importance of trust in developing a relationship of constancy or conversely one of untrustworthiness. The theme of constancy was demonstrated in Bronfenbrenner's (1992) bio-ecological theory of human development. Parents' appeared to need a sense of reliability or dependability in their interactions with educational professionals as found in relationships constructed within Bronfenbrenner's (1992) element of constancy. Positive relationships emerged from these dynamics between parents and educational professionals. Untrustworthiness emerged when parents perceived a lack of consistency or dependability in the interactions of educational professionals with their children. Relationships were expressed as strained under the theme of untrustworthiness.

### **8.3.1 Constancy**

Constancy was a vital element for the understanding of human development as a set of processes where the elements of the person and the environment work on one another to produce the outcomes observed on a daily basis (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). These outcomes served to reassure the parents of the importance of their children to the educational professionals in charge of their care. The parents' perception of caring increased the trust the parents felt towards the educational professionals. A trusting and an enduring relationship developed on the part of the parents towards the school district.

Parent E:       Open to listen to whatever I have to say... willing to work with me... last year I requested a copy of the English curriculum and in several days I had it. Definitely someone I can work with.

Parent D:       (Assistant principal) saying to me that when she questioned the teacher over what happened... the teacher... she felt that she was

being disrespected... and she said to me “I told her I don’t care how you felt, that’s irrelevant, I want to know the facts.” And that like... I gained all of the respect in the world for her.

### **8.3.2 Untrustworthy**

The parents’ perception of educational professionals as being untrustworthy was a great barrier towards the forming of a constructive relationship. The relationships that emerged between Parent D and educational professionals appeared to be contentious for the most part. She shared her lack of trust in the staff to keep her son safe from bullying situations. As revealed in the literature review the parent reacted emotionally to her son’s situation due to the low-trust that existed between her and the educational professionals (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000).

Parent D: So here was what happened is... I get a letter from her... and every single person in the hierarchy gets... the assistant superintendent... the superintendent... and like you name it... they’re all copied on her and it says Dear Mrs. (parent’s name) since you have denied me the opportunity to be a part of this meeting I want to share with you some of my thoughts about (son)... and I’m thinking to myself of course... denied you the opportunity... you never met one time... so what happens is now I’m mad because I’m thinking you’ve got to be kidding me... you really have to be kidding me.

Parent D: You know they are picking and choosing almost... so I don’t know... it seems to me like there was something political going on with this whole (time).

Parent D: They take him out of class to go to the office to get his side of the story... but they make him sit there for 20 minutes without talking to him. Now he's really upset... so he gets to 8<sup>th</sup> period... gym class where they hold the ball over his head all of the time and they tease him... you know... so I guess the principal happened to be walking in and he said he never saw (son)... I never saw anybody so upset... they said he was like stuck in the middle of all these kids and he was just losing it.

#### **8.4 PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: PARENTAL EFFICACY**

Parents who expressed a sense of parental efficacy described a supportive relationship with the educational professionals working with their children. The parents shared their belief in their ability to make a difference for their children due to the staff's willingness to learn from the parents. Moreover, collaborative relations were reinforced by the success the students were meeting with due to their parents' involvement (Fan & Chen, 2001). Parental efficacy served as an equalizing force leading towards strong relationships between parents and educational professionals. Parents felt capable of meeting with educational professionals as equal partners dedicated to the learning needs of children.

Parent B: We also in the home... one more forget you lose your privileges for a week. One time he came home and said I forgot this and I lose a week. To balance out... there was a day when he stabbed

himself with a pencil... he got so angry and he has never done anything like that. The teachers were like... and it happened on the day that I was doing the holiday shop and I had his class up. Well he like... he had forgotten something... you saw it happening... and she was watching everything I did and I said you know that last time you came up and fessed up... sometimes bad things just happen... so you're not going to lose your weekend you not going to... but. We are going to talk about hurting yourself and you know someone in your family that gets aggressive. Do you like that? He said no. Do you want to turn into that person? He said no. So that's what you need to watch... you can get mad... you can get angry and you can scream. You cannot hurt yourself... you cannot hurt anyone else and you cannot hurt walls and friends. We tried to help him balance... so that when your forgetting all the time there's going to be a consequence but when there's five things going on and he's melting down because he's afraid of this... there's grace. There's grace but there's responsibility.

Parent E: His fourth grade year we had an issue with the principal in response to interventions and services. My son is a very slow reader. He always has been. He reads above grade level and comprehends at the college level... but he still... in eighth grade... reading about 65 words per minute. And so he is... we tried everything... title one... we even tried vision therapy outside the

schools... he's just a slow reader... his principal handled... they wanted to do a response to intervention group and contacted me inappropriately. The third day of the year the school sent a form letter to me... and his... was his first year... my son was in the school district... and so three days into a new school district... I get a letter saying that he is being recommended for a response to intervention program that is going to pull him out of either science or social studies for additional reading support... which are two of his all time favorite classes. And it was a form letter... not even signed by the principal. So I had a discussion with the principal at that point.

Parent C: We were more listening... but again I reiterate... again that in that meeting that I wanted to be clear with open information back and forth... I wanted to let everyone in that meeting know that we are parents... but we are taking an active lead in there and if we can enforce some of the things that they want to do at school at home... we need to collaborate.

Parent C: So that they are not thinking and they realize that I can help. I'm not scared to say anything to them... OK.

## **8.5 PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: FRUSTRATION**

Frustration served to undermine the development of constructive relationships between families and educational professionals. Frustration stood in the way of productive communication limiting the number of interactions. The lack of interactions decreased the opportunities for parents to feel welcomed into the everyday processes of the school. Moreover, lack of engagement kept trust from developing between the parents and the educational professionals (Epstein, 1986). As a result, the parents described their relationships with the educational professionals as being more difficult than was necessary.

Parent B: This particular teacher does a lot of groups... because all they are teaching is in groups.

Parent D: He was able to get sensory breaks. I don't know that he needed more time on tests... so that didn't really matter. I mean to tell you the truth he didn't have an IEP until 5<sup>th</sup> grade. He was in the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> grade and hardly paid any attention to.

Parent D: They would have him tell us (child) had a very bad day. Do you want to talk about it now or when you get home. I'm in the car line. You know I said it would have been nice if you called me before. Found out it happened early in the morning and he was sitting outside somebody's office all afternoon. Or the whole rest of the morning. Those were the kind of things that seemed odd. You know they would never call.

Parent D: So here I find out he when he sends me the diagnosis... it is one page on his letterhead... it isn't even one page... its three sentences. "I have been meeting with child for the past three months. I diagnose him with autism..." I think it said Asperger's Syndrome. "If you have any questions... call me." That was the so-called diagnosis.

Parent D: So I just said to my advocate ugh... and now she has become a very dear friend too... what is this... what is this... is this how schools work you know like we put everybody else's needs before the student's?

Parent D: I mean that total like disregard and defiance and I was just like I can't believe it. So it kind of continued through there was never a respect towards the IEP for (son) with certain teachers. I'm not going to say all teachers but...

Parent D: Middle of fifth grade. Well what happened is because him... with them being set up... it just seemed like school district at that time... they just wanted to make it more difficult.

## **8.6 PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: TEAM APPROACH**

Team approach supported the development of relationships that were based on coordination, consultation or teaming. The majority of the collaboration shared by the parents of this study

appeared to be based on a need to consult or coordinate services. True teaming, where each side behaved in a manner of reciprocity and sharing of information amongst all of the members of the team equally, did not appear to occur often in the perception of the parents. However, under the concept of team approach the parents shared that their perception of their relationship with the educational professionals was influenced by whether the teaming was functional or dysfunctional. No matter the form collaboration took (i.e., coordination, consultation, or teaming) what was important to the parents was whether the meeting served its intended function.

### **8.6.1 Functional**

The parents perceived the team approach as functional when the end result was the implementation of services for their children. While the parents of this study seemed not as knowledgeable of their rights under IDEIA (2004), they believed in the educational professionals when the services provided met the needs of their children. Meetings served to connect the parents with the educational professionals in a collaborative relationship for the benefit of the children. Parents described the relationships in the best light when they perceived team approach as functional.

Parent B:       The other thing... I'm sorry... its kind of important... when we had that meeting about the mini ESY um one of the things she did at that point was that he was right on point and is moving on schedule... they are looking for any kind of fallback... is what they are looking for. She gave me a mini update at that point... but they are very happy with him... he's coping with the issues that are



there. And even the big and little stuff is starting to come in its own way. I said I hope you understand that we want to continue to have support for him and she said that was a good idea. That's going to be needed for a while.

Parent C: Met him. It was short and sweet. Spoke to him about our concerns for transition into the new building next year. (Son will be entering middle school, which is held at a different building in the district).

Parent C: That one... we were... they basically were talking to us about what they saw. Um it was more of them... this is what we were perceiving... and they had a plan of action and they basically were walking us through what they were going to do and getting our agreement to do that.

### **8.6.2 Dysfunctional**

Parents described their relationship with educational professionals as dysfunctional when they believed their children were not receiving the necessary services. Parent D perceived a sense of disrespect as she engaged in a meeting for her son (Lo, 2008). In this case the educational professionals communicated to the parent their belief that a three-line diagnosis was not sufficient for a student to be classified. As mandated by IDEIA (2004) this conversation needed to take place in a collaborative fashion with all voices being heard. The length of the communication of the diagnosis did not matter. The diagnosis needed to be discussed as a group as it is clearly incorporated into the law as a recognized disability (IDEIA, 2004). The

determination at this point should have been whether the disability in and of itself had impacted the student's learning within the school environment. The parent's perception was that dialogue never occurred and a determination was made simply on the length of the doctor's communication of the finding of autism in the case of the son. The determination of those voices that were heard in the group was a denial of services under the classification of Autism. During this time the student remained receiving services under gifted with no accommodations mandated due to his diagnosis of autism. The parent shared a strong belief that her voice and the voice of the doctor were not given full respect within the decision-making process. As a result the parent described her relationship to the educational professionals as dysfunctional and a hindrance to the needs of her child.

Parent D:        So here they say what a wonderful turn-around (son) has done...  
                         how he is no longer crying under desks... that he's... and I am  
                         thinking to myself what are they trying to pull here. And I said...  
                         so we are not getting an IEP today for (son). And they say no. I  
                         said... so I said... so basically you are saying that you don't  
                         think... they're saying well this isn't much of a diagnosis. They  
                         are going back to the three sentences. I said huh so you all are  
                         quick to you know judge this... to make this determination. You  
                         know in front of them I said... well you know what I said... I think  
                         maybe we should write in to medical journals cause I think this  
                         may be the first time a school district has cured a child of autism.  
                         Because remember by now I have been to numerous conferences...  
                         I have been reading... I'm on the Internet.

Parent D: They never implemented it... teachers said they never got it... um there was... I mean it was as if the teachers picked and choose themselves.

## **8.7 PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: ROLE CONSTRUCTION**

Role construction revealed itself as a more confusing element for the parents of this study. The parents' shared their sense of struggle with their role in the school in light of their children's disability (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel et al., 2005). They appeared to question who should be responsible for the diagnosis, inferring a great responsibility on the part of the school. This seemed to place the parents in a subservient role to the educational professionals, as they waited in great anticipation for the reasons behind their children's struggles within the classroom. While these students did present problems within the classroom, the stories shared by the parents revealed difficulties that stretched beyond the classroom to the children's everyday lives. As such this deferral to the school district for a greater understanding of the children's problems appeared to be a denouncement of their responsibilities as parents.

Role construction appeared limited from a full embracement of the parents' power to optimize their children's development. As such the parents described relationships with the educational professionals that appeared to be built on a basis of seeking guidance from a professional rather than an equal partnership. The newness of the diagnosis for some of the families may have had a great influence on their behavior in relation to the school. In chapter nine a discussion of the roles parents believe they have in the educational lives of their children

brings a clearer picture of the parents dawning understanding of their need to embrace their role across the many environments that the child inhabits (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

Parent D: Middle of 4<sup>th</sup> grade... we stopped doing the monthly meetings... I am on my own... and the crazy thing was the person they told me I should take him too was here in (local town)... he's on the radio... he's the county's psychologist... that goes to the county and you know for the young people in juvenile detention facilities and all. Someone you think is well respected in the school district and all. Finally someone who should know something. So here's what happens... I take son to him and after a few meetings he says to me what do you want in the diagnosis? And here I'm thinking to myself... here I have been dealing with what for all these years and now I have a psychologist asking me "what" I want in a diagnosis. So I say to him... you know what... the last time I looked I don't have MD after my name. I do not want my son to have autism but if this is what he is going to be diagnosed with then I can go down a path and get him help. Right now we're like floundering.

Parent D: Right... remember at the beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> grade we still didn't have an IEP. And it almost seemed like it was me against them and I kept thinking to myself... why am I coming to these meetings and like we met probably three or four times and I never had the senior teacher at the meetings. And then she would send... like the other two would come and they would get progressively more and more

defensive... and they wouldn't do things... and they wouldn't you know... really shutting down and I thought I don't really understand what is going on here.

Parent D: I kept trying to appeal to her as the special ed director... like what should I be doing that I haven't already done. But I remember calling the school board president... who lived in our neighborhood... and she was just completely unhelpful. I thought who was here for a parent.

## **8.8 PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: PERCEIVED LIFE CONTEXT**

Perceived life contexts appeared in this study to act as a greater risk to the forming of productive relationships between parents and educational professionals. Parent D shared stories of life contexts that overwhelmed her ability to engage in collaboration with the school district. As a result she described relationships that were destructive to her peace of mind. Her self-perceived knowledge and skills to engage in family/school partnerships reflected her belief in her inability to help her child. She did not appear to believe she could reach out to educational professionals to make a difference in the educational life of her son. Parent D described her relationships with educational professionals as uncooperative and negative within the context of her son's disability.

Parent D: All I wanted was for him to be successful and happy. He was clinically depressed... we were on Zoloft for this ten-year-old

child. You know he was... I mean why should that happen ever. I was on medication... you know I was driving down (the road) looking at the white line to the right praying that I didn't pull in front of a truck. And having lost my mother when I was seven that would have been nothing I would have wanted for my boys. It was just too much.

Parent D: I did try to say... so this doesn't seem fair to me... he was the one being beat up and all... maybe they you know... I remember the principal saying to me well just hope the parents don't press charges. I thinking you're kidding me... like really... he has been hitting my son and says he has been hitting my son for 3 weeks but it turned out too that that's the week my dad died so you know there was no fight in me.

## **8.9 PARENTS' DESCRIPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS: "IT'S THE LAW"**

The concept of "it's the law" impact on the forming of relationships between parents and educational professionals was more complex than it initially appeared. The law creates situations of engagement that must occur between parents and the school district. The educational professionals appeared highly trained in the law and the expectations found within the law towards family/school partnerships. However, many of the parents of this study seemed unknowledgeable of special education's complex legal foundation and the jargon utilized by the

educational professionals (Dabkowski, 2004). As such, the parents seemed ill equipped to effectively play the role they needed to play to benefit their children fully. The parents' lack of understanding held them back from engaging in the decision-making process contained within the IEP. This was clearly articulated earlier in the decision on ESY services for one of the students within this study. The parent willingly accepted a determination of ineligibility without being allowed to voice her perspective. Yet, the parent communicated a perception of a great working relationship with the relevant educational professionals.

Parent D in the statement below perceived she was considered hostile when she insisted on services for her child that were contained within the law. In this case her knowledge of the mandates of IDEIA (2004) stood in the way of her perception of a collaborative relationship built on equality of the participants. Parent D described her relationship with the educational professionals as contentious and unproductive.

Parent D: Fifth grade year was very difficult on me... because they were saying I was hostile. The only reason I could think they said I was hostile was because I was expecting them to provide (child) with what the law said they had to do.

#### **8.10 SUMMARY OF THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARISE OUT OF PARTICIPATION WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS**

The parents of this study described the relationships that arose out of their participation with educational professionals in a variety of ways. The variety of ways fit within the concepts that formed the motivators and barriers of family/school partnerships. Parental relationships emerged

from emotional connect, invitation to involvement, trust, parental efficacy, team approach, role construction, perceived life context, and it's the law.

Under the theme of connected found in the concept of emotional connect, the parents described relationships that were strong based on the care and concern the educational professionals demonstrated towards their children. Conversely, relationships were described under the theme of unconnected when the parents perceived a lack of connection between their children and the educational professionals responsible for their educational services. Relationships were considered strained and unproductive when parents believed educational professionals were unconnected with their children. Invitation to involvement served as a great force for parents' perceptions of family/school partnerships.

Parents who felt invited into the educational process expressed a belief in a collaborative relationship between themselves and the relevant educational professionals. The parents shared a constructive relationship based on being acknowledged as a vital part of the educational team. A friendly relationship emerged which supported greater engagement in family/school collaboration. Unfortunately, when parents did not feel invited into the educational process they communicated a relationship that stood in the way of collaboration. The parents perceived the educational professionals as not valuing their input in the educational decision-making process. Trust reinforced the relationships developed under invitation to involvement. The feelings of trust for the educational professionals on the part of the parents led the parents to fully commit to a collaborative relationship. Without trust parents pulled away from the relationship and did not engage in constructive family/school partnerships.

Parental efficacy, role construction, and perceived life contexts also helped parents to define the relationships that developed with educational professionals. Parental efficacy allowed



parents to feel equal to the task of supporting their children in educational endeavors. As such, the parents felt capable of engaging in collaborative relationships with the educational professionals dedicated to their children. Role construction reinforced parental efficacy when parents believed they had a substantial role to play in the educational lives of their children. The parents' perceived life contexts appeared to be a negative in light of collaborative relationships for the parents of this study. The parent that spoke to this concept had overwhelming life occurrences that affected her ability to engage in collaborative relationships without the full support of the educational professionals. The stories she shared depicted her perception of a lack of support from the educational professionals. For this parent frustration was the hallmark of her interactions with the educational staff and portrayed the forming of difficult relationships.

While the law frames the providing of special education services and speaks to the resulting relationships, the parents of this study appeared constrained by the law. Their apparent lack of understanding of the intricacies of the expectations for both themselves and the educational professionals limited the intent of the law for supporting the development of strong relationships between parents and school professionals. Parents were either limited in their engagement through their lack of knowledge or considered hostile when they attempted to utilize the law to support their engagement. As such the law did not support the development of the intended collaborative relationships. The complexities of the parents and educational professionals relationships, as well as the motivators and barriers for family/school partnerships became the foundation of the parents beliefs in the roles they have in the educational lives of their children with ASD.

## **9.0 REPORT OF FINDINGS: WHAT ROLES DO PARENTS BELIEVE THEY HAVE IN THE EDUCATIONAL LIVES OF THEIR CHILDREN WITH ASD?**

The parents of this study expressed the belief that they had a significant role to play in the educational lives of their children with ASD. For the most part these parents believed in their ability to make a difference for their children through their engagement with educational professionals. This belief appeared rooted in the outreach of the parent support group they all attended (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). This group served as a major influence in the daily lives of the parents and their children. The group displayed an underlying belief that parents needed to be active participants in the overall life of their children with ASD. This belief transcended the school environment to include all aspects of all settings that impacted the growth and development of their children (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Furthermore, the involvement of the parents was filtered through the circumstances they each found themselves in due to their children's disability.

The students of this study represented a cross-section of possible presentations of the disability referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For the most part the students had intact cognitive skills while struggling with major social skill deficits. Some of the students dealt with organizational deficits and time management skills. Others dealt with anxiety brought on by the stressors of the school environment. No matter the presentation of ASD the parents were fully committed to making a difference in the lives of their children. The roles the parents

embraced mirrored the needs of their students in the school and in the community. Moreover, the school professionals and the school environment functioned to influence the direction the parents took in role construction as applied to school endeavors.

The concepts of invitation to involvement and parental efficacy framed role construction in the school. The parents that believed they were welcomed into the school environment displayed a greater belief in their overall role to support student engagement in the learning process. One of the parents expressed a belief the educational professionals working with her child did not value her input. As a result she appeared to distance herself from the formal educational process until transferring her child to a cyber charter school. Another parent handled a similar situation by moving to another school district. This allowed both parents to engage in a manner conducive to the message of the parent support group. The parents also displayed a great sense of efficacy due to their belief in their capacity to make a difference.

Parental efficacy emerged as the parents analyzed their ability to make a difference as they engaged in the act of helping their children (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). The parents of this study demonstrated a belief in their ability to make a difference by creating goals in line with those beliefs (Eccles & Harold, 1993). The parents for the most part appeared high in efficacy. As such they persevered in times of great struggles with the school districts. Parent D spent years dealing with the educational system as she fought to find answers for her gifted son who was struggling in the learning process. Her perseverance took her to conferences, support groups, and organizations dedicated to the needs of children with ASD. These activities supported her growth in knowledge and increased her sense of efficacy in dealing with the educational needs of her son.

Parental knowledge supported the roles played by all of the parents of this study. The support group acted as a filter for information concerning all aspects of the affect of ASD on the daily lives of those struggling with the disorder and their families. Moreover, the parents' involvement in the support group extended to community events that supported the growth in knowledge. This was a very important element, as the parents with children with newer diagnoses appeared unaware of their rights and responsibilities within the special education process. IDEIA (2004) contains the responsibility of the state to ensure the parents of classified students access to the knowledge necessary to engage fully in the educational lives of their children.

The lack of knowledge appeared to constrain the parents' roles within the school to function as a full member of the IEP team. This affect was discernable in the story shared concerning ESY services for one of the students. The parent's lack of knowledge caused her to play a role that was deferential to the group as a whole. The parent was unable to engage fully in an equal role in the determining of the necessary services for her son. This may have been to the detriment of the overall needs of the student. The parents of this study articulated their belief in the role they have in the educational lives of their children in the themes of obtaining a diagnosis, special education procedures, special education accommodations, academic success, social success, school events, and the gaining of knowledge of ASD and Special Education.

## **9.1 OBTAINING A DIAGNOSIS**

The parents shared stories concerning the diagnosis of their children that pointed to a heavy reliance on the school systems to serve in this capacity. While the parents questioned some of

the behaviors or characteristics displayed by their children in many environments, they appeared to defer to the schools the responsibility to determine the underlying causes of the observed behaviors. IDEIA (2004) does place the onus of child find on the school districts, charging schools with the responsibility to find and address the needs of children within the community served by the district. This willingness to turn to the school system to determine the needs of the children tends to highlight the parents' perception of their role in light of their children having a recognized condition under special education. At least in the beginning of the process the parents appeared to defer to the educational professionals to shed light on the possible reasons for what the parents were observing. The parents' perceptions of how the school district embraced this role helped to determine how the parents perceived their own role.

The school districts that appeared to embrace their role in the evaluation process as found in section 614 of IDEIA (2004) reflected parents that engaged in supportive roles. For parents that perceived a struggle with the school district in the evaluation process a contentious role emerged. These parents shared stories that reflected a struggle in obtaining a diagnosis to shed light on the learning behaviors of the students. The parents appeared to engage in protracted disagreements with school officials continuing to look to the educational professionals for answers. As seen in Parent D's sharing of her attempts to obtain a diagnosis she continued to rely on the expertise of the school system even while confronting them on what she perceived as a lack of engagement on their part. It was not until a long protracted period did Parent D turn to outside sources to gain insight into her son's difficulties. She never appeared to waver from a belief that she played a role in the educational life of her son, she just appeared to struggle over what shape that role should take. It seemed to take her participation in the support groups and the advancement of her knowledge of ASD in order for her to take a more active role beyond the

one played out with the school district. It was only at this point the parent turned to the MERCK Center.

Parent C: I think we started to think about... you know... some of the things he did... and tried to organize our thoughts... you know I understand this one and this one... so whenever we are asked the question we can answer it.

Parent C: And what I am saying is... whenever we are preparing ourselves for that... we started to think... to reflect back... we are looking at it in a different view and we can see that and we can see this compared to the past.

Parent D: I remember... it was like a Monday afternoon... that I went home and I had this paper that said the MERCK clinic and the number... and I said what the heck one more... one more meeting... you know one more diagnosis... because of course his first diagnosis is endearing... so I called them and I said... and I told them you know... now I'll just be brief. I said I am pretty sure my son is on the autism spectrum. I said I cannot get him an adequate diagnosis. I said... um... they said you know what... we don't usually have an appointment for months. I said I know that's not really going to help us you know... so here they come back on the phone and they say this almost never happens but there's a cancellation for Wednesday morning. And I'm like oh yea we

will be there. And then I said to them on the phone... if son doesn't have like Asperger's or so... whatever this might be... would it be more than three sentences and there was like this long pause and they said it would be like ten pages. So I said okay just checking.

## **9.2 SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCEDURES**

Special education procedures served to define the roles the parents of this study embraced in the educational lives of their children. While the law did not appear to be as great a motivator to participation, as seen in chapter six, it did play an important piece in how the parents came to perceive their roles. The parents' perception of their school district's inclusion of the parents as part of the IEP team shaped their perception of their role within the special education procedures. Some of the parents shared stories that were more inclusive in nature leading the parents to express a belief in their equality in the process. Other parents of the study related perceptions of being excluded from the procedures. These parents shared a belief of being alienated and experiencing great frustration as they attempted to navigate the IEP process (Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002; Ivey, 2004; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). For these parents the perception of their role became one of fighting for the needs of their children against the intractable denial of services from the school districts.

Parent B:      So obviously we have to talk to everyone... even for the placement in classrooms.

Parent C: OK... so I am all involved with working with them and I go to the meetings but my wife does the extra things in the school.

Parent B: And that's one of the things that I have done... and have made it a point that every conference that we have I would take the time out of my work to go there to this... and that's my way of asking the teacher to get information for what's going on from the teachers perception... not my wife's.

### **9.3 SPECIAL EDUCATION ACCOMMODATIONS**

Special education accommodations framed the role of the parents in the educational lives of their children for the parents of this study. Many of the parents spoke of their need to enforce the accommodations found within the IEPs or the 504-service agreement. These accommodations were agreed to by the IEP teams or the 504-service agreement team and included within the appropriate documents. As such these accommodations became legally binding services that had to be rendered to the children (IDEIA, 2004). The perception of the need to constantly monitor the providing of services caused the parents to define their role in a more aggressive vein.

Parent D: Well I had an advocate from the beginning... so we would talk about the kind of things that son needed... like what did we think... and it was all really social related... but some of it was you know... the fact that he wouldn't hand in his work. He would have it completely finished and he wouldn't hand it in.



Parent D: Even in 5<sup>th</sup> grade after he first got the IEP... he had this one um assignment that was like this little tiny thing and because he was a day late the teacher told him to keep it... and I called him because son was distraught... now this is still 5<sup>th</sup> grade and I want to tell you this... when it was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade... but he had just gotten the IEP... and he (the teacher) told him (son) to keep it... and (son) came home and he was just distraught because his fish wasn't going to be part of everybody else's in the ocean... and it was this big deal project... and the teacher even won awards for it. It was a very clever idea and everything... but so I called him and I said I just want to know why you didn't and he said well it was late. And he says "I should treat him different" and I go yea because he has an IEP now. He goes I don't even know what that thing is. Well... I said you know what... you better find out because it's the law. (Son) has two days to hand anything in because he often doesn't understand what his homework assignment is... so you better well take that and you better well give him the grade... the points that he deserves on it and not because it is late.

Parent E: It stills goes back to those individual teachers... so... but I'm more willing to accommodate or remember um that he has the accommodations... and I am having to contact them to say hey you know he has this accommodation... and I'm having to go back and for the most part their like okay.

Parent E: The accommodations which he needs... ah one of the biggest ones is extended time to complete class assignments. So he sometimes comes home with extra homework. And what it is... is class work that he didn't finish and that's okay he is fine with doing extra homework. So we have no problem doing a little extra homework. Extra time to complete assignment. He does have test anxiety... so we (have) an accommodation where if he doesn't finish the test in class he has a study hall twice a week where he can take his test during that study hall... um and finish up. Usually on Sundays I go on line and print out everything he has for assignments for the week that are posted... if they are posted. I will kind of follow up with that as we go along.

#### **9.4 ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

Academic success was a primary focus as parents defined their roles within their children's educational experiences. In the case of these parents they appeared to embrace a responsibility to help ensure academic success for their children. Fan and Chen (2001) reinforced the importance of parental involvement in achievement outcomes. These parents believed they could help their children with the organizational and time management skills they struggled with on a daily basis. Furthermore, their children's responses to their support served to reinforce an active role for the parents.

The attributes of the students in the study served to communicate a need for the focused support of the parents (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005). The children of this study invited their parents into their learning process by requesting their help when they experienced difficulty. The parents of this study demonstrated the ability to help by responding to their children's request in a positive manner. The parents constructed an active role in the educational process for their children due to their belief in their ability to make a difference. Moreover, once diagnosis occurred, the parents took their role beyond the school to investigate services in all areas of the child life. In this aspect parents appeared to take back their responsibility for the oversight of the impact of their children's disability on their everyday lives.

Parent C: And then we took it another step further... what are the programs... what are the things... I mean what was really good. (*Wife*) she does all the looking up. What are the best vacations rates... so this was right up her alley... doing the investigations... finding the services... that type of thing... what would fit for him and what wouldn't.

Parent C: Going onto responsibility... one of the things that I am starting to try and get him to zone in on... once a month... it's a novel... its 100 pages... more or less... and its due for class. Whenever we talk about his book... what I talk to him about... lets make a schedule and first draft... if its due next month... I need a draft a week ahead. So I am trying to get him to agree to this. I need to read ten pages this night and this night and do it this way.

So if he kind of agrees with that and says that... I tell him it won't overwhelm you.

Parent C: I want to make sure he can set the schedule... he has to learn. But how are you going to handle that... say well then I need to do this at this time and demanding he's participating in it. It makes it more successful.

That's what we are trying to do right now. Trying to formulate... what I said earlier... a methodology that he's able to use whether he's in middle school or high school.

Parent E: Someone who is there following every assignment is being completed... a... you know checking the kid's backpack every night... making sure that everything is getting done... helping them do it... that is what I would you know... basically just being there with the kid the whole time doing everything and you know constantly emailing... constantly asking questions... um my son has Asperger's... he does... I am going to have to do that. I do try really hard to like... when he comes home from the evenings and has homework... I say okay get your agenda out... what do you have to do? And he has to verbally tell me and I try to make sure I am keeping that independent. I don't anticipate him being... a... ever being a kiddo... which worries me about college too... that um... he will be able to come home and without some type of

guidance... some type of schedule... some type of something being able to complete his homework independently.

Parent E: But I worry about those things that aren't written down for him... or are said verbally... and then I'm going to be contacting the school... trying to find out... and then teachers... high school teachers are gonna be like he needs to be responsible for doing this... he needs to be responsible. And its like... he has Asperger's.

## **9.5 SOCIAL SUCCESS**

Social success also served to define the parents' perception of their role in the educational lives of their children. The children of this study struggled greatly with social engagement. Social deficits were a hallmark of their presentation on the autism spectrum. The school districts were responsible for addressing social skills deficits within the special education process as a result of the need being caused by the disability. The educational professionals and the parents should have been able to work together to reach greater levels of social development through enhanced learning activities and progress monitoring. The parents shared their perception of the schools struggling to accommodate this developmental need. As such the parents utilized the social activities offered through the support group to offset the perceived deficit of the school's program.

The parents' decision was instrumental in supporting the students in gaining the social skills necessary to lead happier and fuller lives. Bronfenbrenner's (1992) concept of circular

causality reinforced the need to address the deficits in social skills. As the parents related, their children's difficulties within this area during the school day followed the children home to their communities. The children were ostracized from the playgroups that informally came together on the streets of their neighborhoods. The lack of social engagement at home and at school created a catalyst for falling even further behind in their social development. The issues then compounded and returned to school with the children. The parents believed they needed to break this pattern in order for their children to reach social success.

Parent C: He is very good at interacting with adults... but kids at his same level... no. OK and that's often of concern and that's one of the things (*we want to know how to fix*)... and that's the reason why we are up here a lot and that's the reason we will go to the camp and we are trying to find things that he can get involved with... so I am not sitting there and I am entertaining him. Instead he's going out and with other kids playing... and that seems to be the biggest obstacle.

Parent B: Where a mom would say... just don't bother with those kids... just leave them alone. Where the reality is you have to let them play. And that's my friend Elaine said when you have these kids you have to help them understand that there other ways of handling that instead of taking off and going home.

Parent C: He can be very dramatic... you push him and he'll go and he will fling himself on the floor. So I make time to speak to the teacher

to explain and see what he is doing in school. My concern is for social interactions with his peers.

## **9.6 GAINING KNOWLEDGE OF ASD AND SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Gaining knowledge in the areas of ASD and special education appeared to be an important role to the parents of this study. Their involvement in the parent support group focused their attention on understanding the intricacies of ASD and its impact on student learning. The support group invited guest speakers knowledgeable in this area to provide valuable information to the participants. Moreover, the parents travelled as a group to conferences and events to extend their knowledge. These endeavors allowed the parents to grow in efficacy and role construction. The greater the length of time between the classification of their children for special education services and the interviews for this study the greater the growth in knowledge of ASD and special education was noted by the researcher. This time also mirrored their commitment to the parent support group. The parents of this study for the most part had joined the support group upon learning their children's diagnosis. One note must be made of Parent D's experiences within the context of her son's receiving of special education services. Parent D did not have the advantage of a support group as she travelled the road with the school in light of her son's disability. It was her struggles with the school district that led her to form the group that appeared to make such a difference for all of the other participants of this study.

Parent D: To a psychologist... then I started myself going to conferences to find out what is this... because tells you have Aspergers... even though you don't want it like skewed here.

## **9.7 SCHOOL EVENTS**

School events outside of those specific to special education served to help the parents to develop greater roles within the schools. This was an important element to the development of family/school partnerships that went beyond the rights and responsibilities contained within special education. This element allowed the parents to connect with educational professionals in much the same manner as all other parents. The parents shared stories of doing bulletin boards, attending school board meetings, open houses and other school events. These events helped the parents to feel invited in to the overall environment of the school. Educational professionals communicated to the parents their belief in the importance of parental involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007).

Parent C: Um you know... I always make room to talk to them.  
Any other meetings... the school board meetings that we go to...  
not school boards the IEP meetings.  
Not only that... but the other parent meetings... some of those...  
the open houses... the gym day... meet some of the teachers and  
talk to them to.

## **9.8 SUMMARY OF THE ROLES PARENTS BELIEVE THEY HAVE IN THE EDUCATIONAL LIVES OF THEIR CHILDREN WITH ASD**

The parents of this study appeared to believe they played a vital role in the educational lives of their children. Each part of the special education process (i.e., obtaining a diagnosis, special



education procedures, special education accommodations, academic success, social success, gaining knowledge of ASD and special education, and school events) served as a theme in the analysis of the data in order to understand how parents perceive their roles. In the theme of obtaining a diagnosis there was a distinct impression the parents deferred to educational professionals during the early stages. Parents appeared to turn to the professionals for greater understanding of the overall condition of ASD and its possible impact in the classroom. This sense of deferring to professionals also appeared to occur in the procedures of special education during the initial stages. As time progressed parents appeared to take greater ownership of the process. At this point parents communicated a need to be treated as equals as members of the IEP team. This change in behavior may have been facilitated by the parents need to monitor the providing of the accommodations incorporated in the IEP.

Parents shared their need to closely monitor the providing of accommodations for their children. The perception of the parents was that the educational professionals did not follow through on the accommodations that were to be provided. In the stories shared by the parents it took their reminding educational professionals of the legal foundation of the accommodations to assure their compliance. This feature of special education was very important to the parents due to the impact on academic success for their children. The degree of organizational skills and time management deficits caused the students to struggle in the area of homework completion and the completion of classroom assignments. As such these deficits had a negative impact on students' grades. The parents were willing to put a great deal of time into helping their children to learn the necessary skills to accomplish these tasks. A few of the parents did despair their children would never incorporate these skills to the level necessary for overall success. A parent

of an older student was concerned for the fast approaching high school and college years. This concern emerged in their fears for the development of social skills as well.

The parents of this study shared deep concern for their children's ability to develop social competency. A belief in the need for good social skills led the parents to focus on this as a necessary role for the parents to play. The parents attempted to include social skill development as a concentration area in the IEP. Educational professionals appeared to shy away from incorporating social goals into the IEPs of the students. Unfortunately, it is communicated to the parents that the educational professionals do not consider the parents as equal in the planning process of the IEP. While social skill development may serve as a greater challenge in the classroom, it is an appropriate skill to develop within the goals section of the IEP. The parents requests were reasonable in light of the developmental data presented in the present levels of functioning found within the documents. The exclusion of such goals was telling of how the educational professionals truly reached out to the parents and included them as vital members of the IEP team. Parents appeared to feel alienated from the process and questioned their role within the educational domain due to their lack of influence in developing IEP goals. This led the parents of this study to embrace knowledge seeking behaviors.

The parents of this study were willing to empower themselves with knowledge of ASD and special education to support the continual growth and development of their children. The commitment to this role began for many of the parents as a trip to the parent support group. This group allowed the parents to engage in dialogue with others who understood the emotional toll of raising a child dealing with ASD. Together the parents were willing to do all that was necessary to gain greater insight into the needs of the condition and its impact on education. The parents appeared to understand the importance of their role in light of the overall development of their

children. They shared a belief that through knowledge they could truly embrace the equal role expected of them by the state and federal government in the education of their children. The parents expressed a strong commitment to their children across the spectrum of school and community. They expressed a firm belief in their role as influential members of the school team.

Beyond that role, the parents articulated the belief that their role incorporated all of the needs of their children in all of the many environments that interact to produce the constancy and change that would occur for their children over the course of their lifetime (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This belief caused the parents to celebrate all of the ways they could involve themselves within the school environment. Attending school events allowed the parents to move beyond the limited focus of the children's disability to embrace all the school brings to a child. In this way the parents were able to see their role in the larger context of being a vital part of the whole school.

## **10.0 SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Family/school partnerships can draw parents in to participate actively in the educational lives of their children or can act as barriers to keep parents from engaging fully. This study examined the perceptions of parents of students classified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) towards family/school partnerships. In particular I wanted to discover what motivates parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships and what acts as barriers. My desire to understand the motivators and barriers was to provide educational professionals with insight that would allow them to promote and sustain family involvement. I hope this body of work inspires the necessary changes in school procedures to encourage the level of parent involvement reflected in the literature that facilitates student success (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Christenson, 2004; Coots, 1998; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1992, 2001d; Epstein & Connors, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001).

This chapter contains a summary of major findings in light of the characteristics of the participants, motivators and barriers for family/school partnerships, relationships that arose to support or hinder family/school partnerships, and the roles parents believe they have in the educational lives of their children with ASD. The perception of the participants of the study towards family/school partnership in relation to the literature is discussed. Implications and considerations for future research are also addressed within this chapter. The chapter concludes

with my attempt to share how this study allowed me to think through my own perceptions of family/school partnerships due to being a parent of a child with autism.

## **10.1 SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS**

### **10.1.1 Major Findings and Participants' Characteristics**

The perceptions of the parents of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) towards family/school partnerships appeared to be as complex as the parents themselves. The cross-section of parents who participated in this study belonged to a parent support group in western Pennsylvania. While on the surface the parents did not seem very diverse, their personal experiences did set them apart from one another. The women participants varied from professionals working outside the home to women currently remaining at home fulltime. All of the women were well educated, having at least some college. One participant had a terminal degree in special education. The father was employed in a professional position outside the home and had an undergraduate degree in computers, as well as a Master of Business Administration. The level of education may have influenced the parents' involvement in the educational lives of their children. The membership in the parent support group appeared to have a direct connection to the parents' levels of involvement. The parents displayed involvement behaviors through their membership in the parent support group. Life experiences beyond their children having ASD also appeared to play a major role in their commitment to making a difference in the lives of their children.

Two of the participants were older parents having waited well beyond the average age for having a first child. This wait for the woman had led to a major health crisis during the pregnancy. The woman suffered a stroke that necessitated intensive therapy to learn to walk and talk again. This period lasted well into the second year of her child's life and was considered by professionals to be the cause of the early developmental lags displayed by the son. This miscalculation of the underlying cause of the son's early presentation of the characteristics of ASD caused a delay in intervention services. The son was not diagnosed until he turned 10 years old and was struggling within the classroom. The delay in diagnosis had an effect on the parent's perception of family/school partnership. The early years of schooling proved to be more contentious as the student struggled to fit in with the other students and perform well in the learning environment.

Another parent functioned as a single parent during the week as her husband commuted out of state for his employment. The family had generational ties to this area and decided not to uproot the family when the husband's position changed through a promotion. This left the parent here to deal almost exclusively with the school district. The parent shared it was a relationship fraught with discord until transferring her son to a cyber charter school. The contentiousness of the relationship shaped the parent's perception of family/school partnerships. She believed that she was an unequal partner always striving to find common ground. Another mother echoed this relationship as she encountered a great deal of friction in the current school year. In her case the school district was struggling to accept the student's need for services. Her interactions with the educational professionals focused on their desire to declassify the student for the coming school year. The parent feared declassification would negatively affect her child and cause the child to fall further behind academically and socially. This parent also shared a perception of

family/school partnership that was dysfunctional. The final parent had the advantage of holding a degree in special education. Her knowledge of special education did not always translate well as she dealt with the personal aspects of her own son's needs.

This parent knew her rights and responsibilities as a parent of a child with a disability (IDEIA, 2004). Furthermore, she knew the rights and responsibilities of her son and the educational professionals under the law. Difficulties emerged as she questioned her interactions for her son in light of her knowledge. This parent questioned whether she was over involved in the education of her child. She worried how the educators dealing with her child perceived her. She shared her concern that they saw her as too involved and unable to allow her son to navigate his school responsibilities himself. She questioned if perhaps she was, but believed her son would not be able to function without the level of support she was giving to him. Her willingness to be self-reflective concerning her interactions led her to perceive a much more constructive view of family/school partnerships. All of these parents shared their own views of the relationships that developed as a result of their interactions with the educational professionals based on the needs of their children. While there were differences in the resulting relationships, the parents shared common reasons for the motivators and barriers that emerged towards family/school partnerships. Moreover, the parents described common beliefs in the roles they should play in the educational lives of their children with ASD.

### **10.1.2 Motivators and Barriers for Family/School Partnerships for the Participants of the Study**

The parents of this study shared the concepts that served as motivators and barriers towards their engagement in family/school partnerships. A concept could serve as either a motivator or a

barrier for collaboration between the parents and the school's staff. The existing relationship between the parent and the educational professionals appeared to be the determining factor of whether the concept served as a motivator or a barrier. In the concept of invitation to involvement the findings reinforced the importance of parents feeling welcomed into the educational system by the educational professionals working with their children. As seen in the stories of the parents it was very important to them to believe the professional educators valued their participation. When parents perceived they were not valued in the school environment invitation to involvement stood as a barrier to their participation.

This finding carried through to the requirements found within special education. The concept of invitation to involvement took on greater importance when paired with the rights and responsibilities incorporated for parents in IDEIA (2004). Special education law contains a mandate for parents' to participation fully in the determination and provision of services for their children. In order for parents to engage fully in the special education process they articulated clearly the behaviors they needed to see from the educational professionals. They needed their voices to be heard and their thoughts to be incorporated into the programming and services provided for their children. They believed they had important knowledge and a strong role to play in supporting their children to reach academic and social success. Educational professionals' disregard of the knowledge the parents had concerning the impact of ASD on their children communicated to the parents they did not have an equal role in the educational process. Hence, communication provided a means in which invitation to involvement could serve as either a motivator or a barrier for the parents of children receiving special education services. Trust was also a primary concept embedded in invitation to involvement.



The development of a trusting relationship between the parents and the educational professionals proved to be a major motivator for family/school participation. This finding made sense in light of parents' concern for their children's academic and social achievement. Trust developed for the parents when the educational professionals followed through on the programming contained within the students IEPs. Trust also developed when the students were incorporated within the regular education curriculum, ensuring the children had a balanced educational experience. Ultimately, the children had the best potential outcomes when the educational professionals interacted with the parents in a positive, supportive manner. Positive interactions appeared to be the bedrock of trusting relationships that increased parental involvement in family/school collaboration.

Emotional connect also emerged as a major finding in this study. The parents expressed a deep seeded need for the educational professionals to emotionally connect with their children. A sense of care on the part of educators motivated parents to enter into family/school collaborations. Emotional connect served as a strong barrier as well. The study found that when the environments of the home and the school did not connect the student's needs were not accommodated. The need to be hyper-vigilant in the providing of special education services drew the parents into family/school partnership in an unproductive manner. The parents shared stories of friction developing with educational professionals when they felt a need to constantly monitor their children's programming. These relationships then stood as barriers for productive family/school partnerships.

Parental efficacy served to reinforce parents' commitment to family/school collaboration. Parents' belief in their ability to make a difference in their children's educational lives served as a great motivator to engagement in participatory behaviors. The parents of this study believed

they had something to offer their children and the educational professionals working with their children. These parents spent hours engaged in learning more about ASD, the possible causes, presentations, and impact on academic and social growth. The parents' willingness to share their growing knowledge of the disability steered them into collaboration. The value of the information had the capacity to help teachers struggling with comprehending the manifestation of this disorder in the classroom to come too greater understanding. Formal school procedures to facilitate the parents sharing of their burgeoning knowledge in the field of ASD would support not only professional development but also a feeling of connection leading to greater family/school partnerships. Role construction reinforced parental efficacy for this group of parents.

The parents of this study believed they had an overall responsibility to support their children to reach their greatest potential in light of their having ASD. The parents as stated above spent time attending conferences to increase their knowledge of ASD. As a result their behavior spoke to their belief in engaging in collaborative behaviors. These collaborative behaviors caused the parents of this study to want to employ a team approach that was inclusive of all members. Team approach proved to be either a motivator or a barrier depending on the relationships developed with the educational professionals.

When the parents felt they were treated as equal members of the IEP team they spoke more openly of a belief in the team approach being inclusive. When the parents questioned their position within the team approach the team acted as a barrier to their collaborative behaviors. This pattern was also seen within the concept of "It's the Law." Parents did not place emphasis on their participation as a result of the legal requirements until they perceived the educational professionals were not carrying through on the provisions of the IEP. At that point the parents

did appear to defer to the legal requirements for providing special education services to their children. Future policy may focus on developing team approaches that support motivation towards family/school partnerships. This endeavor would continue to focus all concerned on constructive relationships that forestall parents from feeling a need to engage in legal procedures to ensure their children receive the special education services they are entitled to through IDEIA (2004). Furthermore, this would ensure the development of relationships between parents and educational professionals that would support the emergence of strong family/school partnerships.

### **10.1.3 Relationships that Arose to Support or Hinder Family/School Partnerships**

The describing of the formation of relationships between the parents and the educational professionals highlighted the parents' perceptions towards family/school partnerships. Parents of the study that described healthy relationships with the school staff described more positive feelings towards family/school partnerships. Those parents that described fractious relationships struggled to connect with the educational professionals in a productive manner. These parents described engagement in family/school partnerships that were dysfunctional and harmful to the educational experiences of the children. No matter the tenor of the relationship the parents of this study continued to have interactions with the school staff. While one parent pulled back from engagement for periods of time due to the contentious nature of her relationship with school officials, she reconnected when situations arose that demanded her interactions. The destructive nature of these interactions continued until the family decided to transfer the student to a cyber charter school. Another parent also handled the beginning of a relationship fraught with disconnect by moving to another school district. Both parents shared stories of better

relationships leading to constructive engagement in family/school partnerships as a result of the moves.

The motivators and barriers for family/school partnerships played a role in the development of relationships between parents and educational professionals. Those concepts that brought families into participation also served to reinforce positive relationships. When those same concepts served to stand as barrier for the parents of this study the relationships that arose were unproductive in nature. In the concept of emotional connect the parents described their relationships as either connected or unconnected. In the connected relationships the parents expressed a belief in the educational professionals when the parent believed they were dedicated to the care of their children. In the theme of unconnected, parents believed the educational professionals were unwilling to understand the dynamics of ASD and its impact in the classroom. When this occurred parents withdrew from active participation with the school officials. Parents described relationships as unproductive for providing the necessary services for their children to meet with academic and social success. Another major finding was the implication of invitation to involvement in the forming of constructive relationships for forming strong family/school partnerships.

Invitation to involvement played a very important role in the forming of relationships between parents and educational professionals. Friendly behaviors between parents and educational professionals led to supportive relationships, just as unfriendly behaviors resulted in unsupportive relationships. Trust, a key element found in invitation to involvement, furthered the development of productive relationships. Trust communicated to parents that they were valued as were their children. Parental efficacy resulted in parents describing supportive relationships that enhanced family/school collaboration. Parents believed they had the

knowledge to play a supportive role in their children's lives. Educational professionals that incorporated parents' knowledge and skills in the development of their children's IEP strengthened their overall relationship with the parents. This was reflected in the form team approach took in the families of this study. A major finding of the study was the capacity of the approached used in the IEP team to either enhance or be a barrier to family/school participation. Team approach that was inclusive was perceived as functional when the end result was the implementation of services for the children. A functional team approach supported parents' belief in the educational professionals, which led to the forming of collaborative relationships. The collaborative relationship ensured all voices were reflected in the IEP document, resulting in a crafted document that served the developmental needs of the student. When the educational professionals followed through on the services as crafted in the IEP, role construction became a factor in parent/staff relationships. The parents of this study tended to construct their role in the team as one of support for the educational professionals and the special education process. The parents supported the decisions made for the rendering of services and incorporated the strategies into their work with their children at home. This allowed for a coming together of the home and school environments to best support students in academic and social growth and development.

#### **10.1.4 The Roles Parents Believe They Have in the Educational Lives of Their Children with ASD**

The parents of this study shared a deep belief in their responsibility to play an active role in the educational lives of their children. As noted in chapter 9, the parents displayed behaviors that were focused on supporting their children to reach their greatest potential in the context of dealing with ASD. The relationships they developed with educational professionals reinforced

their belief in their role as primary support for their children. Whether they shared the development of strong relationships with educational professionals or ones that were dysfunctional in nature, the parents still perceived themselves as having the primary responsibility for their children's academic and social success.

## **10.2 DISCUSSION**

The goal of this study was to increase our knowledge of the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships in order to formulate school procedures that would motivate parents to participatory behaviors. The hypothesis that there are motivators and barriers that affect parental involvement behaviors for parents of students with ASD was supported by the study. Furthermore the belief that those behaviors that served as motivators could also serve as barriers was found to be true. These findings fit with several broader models of participation found in the literature developed for parents of children without disabilities.

The model developed by Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) and Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) found parents' participation in family/school partnerships was based on psychological factors that motivate parents to become involved. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) and Walker et al. (2005) established parents become involved or uninvolved for the four major reasons of role construction, parental efficacy, invitations to involvement, and perceived life contexts. It was clear from the qualitative analysis that the participants of this study found the psychological factors of role construction, parental efficacy, invitations to involvement, and perceived life contexts to be major motivators or barriers towards family/school partnerships. The parents who felt the educational professionals

were welcoming them into the process of participation were more likely to exhibit participatory behavior. The parents who shared stories reflective of not being invited into involvement displayed non-participatory behavior.

Participants who shared a belief in their responsibility to support their children to reach their optimum development also displayed participatory behavior (Green et al., 2007). Participants who held a more global sense of responsibility did not necessarily participate in the school at the same level that they participated in other services their children were receiving due to their diagnosis of ASD. This global interpretation of role construction appeared to go beyond the school as the salient feature in the child reaching his fullest developmental potential. These participants analyzed their perception of life contexts and selected those services they perceived to have the highest cost benefit for the development of their children. The relationships the participants had developed with educational professionals appeared to be the determining factor in the parents' perception of the importance of the educational system in the academic and social success of their children with ASD. Participants who expressed the concept of barriers more than the concept of motivators appeared to look outside the school environment for means to support their children to reach their optimum development. This finding reinforces the Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) psychological factors as serving as the origins of participation for the parents of this study.

An important note must be made when considering the comparison between this study and the model developed by Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) and Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005). While the parents expressed the psychological factors found within Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) and Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) model, additional psychological factors

where isolated that appeared to serve as mitigating factors towards family/school participation. These additional factors appeared to emerge from the additional responsibilities that are expected of parents of children receiving special education services. Knowing these additional psychological factors gives educational professionals a broader understanding of what they may need to do to ensure parents equal access into family/school participation.

The findings of this study also fit with Bronfenbrenner's (1992) bio-ecological theory of human development. As found in Bronfenbrenner's (1992) theory, the parents' participatory behavior was not linear but circular and complex. As the family participated with the educational professionals and the educational professionals participated with the parents, the participatory behaviors changed to reflect the results of the interactions. The property of the relationships, as well as the impact of the relationship occurred to either increase or decrease participatory behaviors on the parts of the parents and the educational professionals. Equifinality as captured in bio-ecological theory captured the different antecedents leading to the same outcomes for many of the participants of this study. We learn from this outcome the importance of developing multiple options for family involvement and participation (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2005). The same strategy may not result in the same outcome for all families. Family participation must be designed to meet the individual needs of each student and her family.

Epstein's (2001) theory of overlapping spheres of influence also fit with the findings of this study. Epstein (2001) captured the ever-changing nature of family/school relationships that encourage family/school partnerships. As in this study, Epstein (2001) acknowledged that different family-school interactions occurred as children aged and displayed different social/cognitive development. The delayed social/cognitive development found in ASD emerged as a modifier for the perception of the participants towards family/school participation. This



outcome reinforced Epstein's (2001) theory of the overlapping spheres of family, school, and community. The social/cognitive delays acted to either push or pull the spheres of home and school together or apart. In those cases where the parents perceived an understanding of the delays on the part of educational professionals, a closer working relationship appeared to emerge. For participants who shared a perception of a disconnect between the students and the educational professionals, a pulling apart of the spheres of influence emerged. The productiveness of the partnerships in developing special education services emerged as being proportionate to the parents' view of the overlap between home and school. The participants who shared a perception of a great amount of overlap between these spheres of influence displayed more participatory behavior than those parents who did not share a perception of much overlap. This observation was important in light of the federal and state mandates for parental participation in special education.

The legal mandates emerged as a less significant motivator for participation than I imagined at the beginning of the study. In light of Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler's (2005), Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey's (2005), Epstein's (2001), and Bronfenbrenner's (1992) models for participation it appeared that mandating participation served a limited function. The relationships, which formed due to the interactions that occurred because of the students' classifications, emerged as the strongest motivation for participation. This knowledge allows educational professionals to implement strategies and procedures to build productive relationships that enhance family/school participation for parents of students with ASD.

### **10.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES**

The implications of this study revolved around the importance of parental involvement to the proficient cognitive development and academic success of students with ASD (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Christenson, 2004; Coots, 1998; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1992, 2001d; Epstein & Connors, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001). This study reaffirms the psychological factors identified in Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler (2005) and Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) model of family/school partnerships. Along with the four psychological factors identified, this study reveals the importance of trust, emotional connect, team approach, parent's knowledge, the mandates of special education law, and frustration to the formation of constructive family/school partnerships. School programs aimed at increasing parent participation may reach greater success if they keep in mind the psychological factors that increase or decrease parent participation in family/school partnerships. Moreover, incorporating Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence should be considered as a piece of the puzzle when designing school policies and procedures. Bronfenbrenner's (1992) bio-ecological theory of human development encourages procedures designed to take into account the individuality of families.

Educational professionals who keep in mind the individual needs and compositions of their students and the families to which they belong will have a greater chance of facilitating family/school partnerships. This study and the studies upon which it was built painted a picture of our ability to facilitate increasing levels of family/school partnerships for parents of students with ASD.

#### **10.4 CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The completion of this study has served to clarify the perception of this group of parents of children with ASD towards family/school partnership. As noted previously, this group of parents displayed engagement behaviors that may have been greater than what would have been found in parents of children with ASD that were not involved in a parent support group. That being said conducting research of families of children with ASD outside of a parent support group may extend our knowledge of the perception of parents of children with ASD towards family/school partnership.

Moreover, an ability to observe IEP meetings of the families involved in the study may help to better analyze the perceptions of the parents. This would allow the researcher to observe the interactions of the parents and the educational professionals. While much could be determined from a review of the IEP documents, an opportunity to observe firsthand may lend greater insight. Interpretation of the additional data collected at the IEP meetings may enhance our understanding of the nuances of family/school partnerships.

Investigation of this phenomenon in a more diverse setting may also extend our knowledge of parents' perceptions of family/school partnerships. The community in which this study occurred represented a very limited degree of diversity. Conducting this study in the immigrant communities of West New York, New Jersey and Newark, New Jersey would expand our knowledge to other important segments contained within the ASD community of families.

## **10.5 THINKING THROUGH MY PERSPECTIVE OF FAMILY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AS A RESULT OF THIS STUDY**

I came to this research with some preconceived notions of how parents of children with ASD perceive family/school partnerships. These notions came out of my own experiences as a parent with a son with ASD and the multitude of relationships I experienced during his school years. I had been fortunate in his early years to have very strong supportive interactions with the educational professionals providing his special education services. As a new parent in the early years of the providing of special education services under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142), I was unsure as to my role within the educational system. The school district provided seminars and training for new parents to ensure we had the knowledge and skills to engage fully in the special education process. The training allowed us to enter into the process with confidence and a belief in our ability to make a difference.

This sense of efficacy supported my development in role construction; I believed I had a role to play in my child's education and my behaviors reflected that belief. Furthermore, the school district made me feel welcomed into the process by providing the training I needed to engage fully. These concepts resonated with the parents of this study. Now, just as then, the parents shared a need to feel respected and valued as partners in the special education process. Training communicated our importance to the school staff and their belief in our equal membership in the team approach of special education. As an extension, I felt welcomed into the school environment at large, joining PTA, running after-school programs for all of the students, and volunteering whenever extra hands were needed. The parents of this study reflected many of the same behaviors in the greater environments of their schools. Change came to our family though when life took us to a new state and a new school community.

The new school community appeared further behind in the implementation of the federal law (P.L. 94-142). At that time one state did not have to recognize the special education determinations of another state, so our son was declassified. He began to struggle in the learning process, going from a child who with support was learning at a good pace to one who was not meeting with success. The further behind he fell the greater his loss of self-esteem. As a parent I became frustrated as I tried to navigate the school system. We had traded a school system dedicated to family/school partnerships in the area of special education to one that appeared to not value parent participation in this domain. It took several years and engaging in due process within special education to force the school district to reclassify our son and give him the support he needed. The process remained contentious until his graduation from high school. I was never able to form the same collaborative relationship I had so enjoyed in his early school years.

I never felt welcomed into the later school system or valued by the educational professionals working with my son. I never developed a level of trust for the educational professionals that were charged with the providing of his educational services. Trusting the educational professionals working with my son was very important to me in order to sustain a long-term collaborative relationship. I needed to believe his teachers were following through on the services as planned in his IEP and doing all that they could do as he struggled in the learning process. We left the school district never reaching the level of relationship needed for a strong collaborative relationship. I often questioned why the two relationships seemed so diametrically opposite to me. I questioned whether it was how I was interacting with the educational professionals in this new school district that was placing us at such great odds. I questioned whether it was something to do with the system, as it existed in the new school district.

These questions led me to want to discover greater understanding in family/school partnerships. I wanted to have an opportunity to investigate how other parents came to build and develop the necessary relationships to support their children's educational processes. I wanted to know if time had changed how parents of children with ASD perceived family/school collaboration. Ultimately, I wanted an opportunity to analyze in a critical domain the feelings left behind by my own experiences. I wanted to ensure I dealt with these feelings, so they would not overwhelm my interpretation of the stories shared by the parents of this study. I hope I have been able to bring a balanced ear to all that I have heard. I believe this study tells the story that we, educational professionals and parents, have the ability to create collaborate relationships that support the growth and development of our children with ASD. We can move beyond the barriers against family/school partnerships and embrace the motivators that support strong, productive family/school partnerships. We can build the bridges necessary to accomplish this task.

The metaphor of the bridge proved to be much richer than I originally envisioned at the beginning of this journey. At that time my interpretation remained rooted in the school piece of the metaphor as shared by Epstein (2001a). In her version the bridge connected a student's home, school, and community. With my focus on the school, I had not really thought through the full impact of the community of the participants of the study in light of their membership in a parent support group. I realized much later on that membership in the group spoke to the parents' reactions to family/school collaboration. I further realized the group helped to shape and mold the parents' perceptions of participation. The bridge between the families and the support group served to support the bridge between the families and the schools. As Epstein (2001a) revealed the bridges that connected the students' homes, schools, and communities became the

foundations upon which growth and development occurred for the students. Those very same bridges also supported the growth and development of the parents of this study.

The commitment to the parent support group became a lived experience for the parents that reinforced their commitment to their children. Within the group the parents experienced support for their own growth and development in the understanding of ASD. Through their growing understanding came a greater commitment to supporting their children in all of their endeavors. The parents grew in a sense of efficacy that facilitated their growth in role construction. The greater belief in their knowledge and skills allowed the parents to approach the special education process with confidence. Their burgeoning self-confidence communicated to the educational professionals the parents' ability to be a vital part of the determining and implementing of special education services for their children. Ultimately, the parent support group for this group of parents emerged to sustain a fuller engagement in family/school partnerships.

While this study allowed me to reflect back on my own experiences, shedding light on some of the experience, it also left me questioning other pieces of the experience. Wondering how we can use all of the environments that impact the growth and development of children with ASD to better support their reaching their maximum potential plagued my thinking throughout this study. How can we better align parents and school districts so we can maximize services to support student success? I look forward to wrestling with these questions as I continue to move forward as a researcher.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS**

The Executive Director of a parent support group in western Pennsylvania facilitated the selection of participants through purposeful maximum variation sampling. She identified families that fit the study's parameters and were willing to participate. Once potential participants had been identified a formal invitation to participate in the study was distributed. The letter contained a description of the proposed study and the anticipated level of involvement expected of participants. Upon receiving the letter, parents were asked to contact me concerning their willingness to participate. Those who expressed a willingness to participate became the participants of the study.



March 7, 2013

RESEARCH STUDY:	Building Bridges: A Case Study of the Perceptions of Parents of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Towards Family/School Partnerships
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Susan Lautenbacher, M.Ed. University of Pittsburgh School of Education Department of Administrative and Policy Studies
DISSERTATION ADVISOR:	Dr. Mary Margaret Kerr University of Pittsburgh School of Education 5911 Wesley W. Posvar Hall 230 South Bouquet Street Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Dear Participant,

Your family support group has been invited to participate in a research study on the perceptions of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships. The study has been approved by the University of Pittsburgh's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and will serve as my doctoral dissertation. I am currently enrolled as a doctoral student in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education, Department of Administrative and Policies Studies, Social and Comparative Analysis in Education program. I am also the parent of an adult son with classic autism.

I am conducting this research study to learn more about how parents of students with autism, who receive special education services, feel about their interactions with the staff at their child's school. I am especially interested in knowing more about what you think helps to make these interactions more like a "partnership", and what things might stand in the way of a partnership. All parents of students, younger than 18, who have a diagnosis on the Autism Spectrum, and who receive special education support, are eligible.

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns. My contact information is listed on the first page of this document.

I greatly appreciate your consideration to become involved in this research study. If you are interested in participating in the research study please complete the enclosed form and return to the principle investigator in the self-addressed stamp envelope by 03/12/2013.

Sincerely yours,

Susan Lautenbacher, M.Ed.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

The parents and their children that consented to participate in this study signed the Consent to Participate protocol as found on the next pages.

## **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Study Names:** **Building Bridges: A Case Study of the Perceptions of Parents of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Towards Family/School Partnerships**

**Research Director:** Susan Lautenbacher, M.Ed.  
University of Pittsburgh  
School of Education  
Department of Administrative and Policy Studies  
Phone:  
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**Dissertation Advisor:** Mary Margaret Kerr, Ph.D.  
University of Pittsburgh  
School of Education  
5911 Wesley W. Posvar Hall  
230 South Bouquet Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15260  
Phone:  
Email:

I am conducting this research study to learn more about how parents of students with autism, who receive special education services, feel about their interactions with the staff at their child's school. I am especially interested in knowing more about what you think helps to make these interactions more like a "partnership", and what things might stand in the way of a partnership. All parents of students, younger than 18, who have a diagnosis on the Autism Spectrum, and who receive special education support, are eligible.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in one to two hours of formal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews to be conducted at a time and place of your choosing. With your agreement, the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed via a computer-based transcription program. You will then have an opportunity to review the transcripts and delete, modify, or elaborate on your responses. I may also request a follow-up interview.

Additionally, I will ask you to share a copy of your student's current Individualized Education Program (IEP). Your decision or your child's decision to not share his/her IEP does not eliminate a potential participant from eligibility for this study.

Confidentiality is a high priority and I promise to maintain your anonymity in the process. All audio-recordings will be erased upon the successful completion of the research study. I will expunge all identifiable information from the audio-recordings and all resulting transcripts. Each participant will be assigned a unique and unidentifiable number known only to the researcher.

All identifying information will also be expunged from your student's IEP. The IEP will be assigned the parent participant's number. All information about you and your child will be kept in a secure location. All paper records will be stored in a locked file cabinet, and all electronic records, including the audio-recording will be stored in password-protected files. Your identity on these records will be indicated by a case number rather than by your name, and the code linking your name to the number will be maintained separately with access available only to the research director.

Moreover, your name, your child's name, and your school district will not be identified in the final report. As such, this is a minimal risk study from which no unintended or negative effects should arise from your participation. There will be no cost to you for participating.

You will not receive any benefit from participating. The semi-structured interview method may give you an opportunity to reflect on your experiences bringing greater clarity to your family/school participation. Giving the participant the opportunity to reach this level of personal understanding is a strength of qualitative research that you may find of great value.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your consent for participation at any time. However, to formally withdraw please provide a written and dated notice of this decision to the research director at the address listed on the first page of this document. Upon receiving your written decision to withdraw any research data collected will be destroyed.

\*\*\*\*\*

## VOLUNTARY CONSENT

The above information has been explained to me and all of my current questions have been answered. I understand that I am encouraged to ask questions, voice concerns or complaints about any aspect of this research study, and that such future questions or concerns will be answered by Ms Lautenbacher, whose contact information is on page 1 of this form.

At any time, I may also contact the Human Subjects Protection Advocate of the IRB Office [1.866.212.2668] to discuss problems, concerns, questions, obtain information, offer input, or discuss situations, if Ms Lautenbacher is not available.

By signing this form I agree to participate in this research study. A copy of this consent form will be given to me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's printed name

PARENTAL PERMISSION (used when the IEP is provided)"I understand that, as a minor (age less than 18 years), the child named below is not permitted to participate in this research study without my consent. Therefore, by signing this form, I give my consent for his/her participation in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Relationship to child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Child

*For those students with the developmental capacity to assent*

This research study has been explained to me and I agree that my IEP can be used as research data

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

#### VERIFICATION OF EXPLANATION

I certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this study, and I have discussed the possible risks of study participation. Any questions the person has about this study have been answered, and I will always be available to address future questions as they arise.

I further certify that no research component of this protocol was begun until after this consent form was signed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Role in Research Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDES**

The following interview guides contained the research questions as topics that were raised during the interview. This design assured the topics and questions corresponded with the main research questions.

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

### I. General Background Information

Research ID # (Parent): \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

Race:

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black, African American
- ☐ Hispanic, Latino, Spanish
- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Pacific Islander
- ☐ Asian

Education:

- ☐ High School Diploma
- ☐ Some College
- ☐ College Degree Area of Concentration: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Coursework in Special Education

Profession/Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Research ID # (Child): \_\_\_\_\_

Age of Child: \_\_\_\_\_

Placement in special education as found in IEP:

- ☐ Itinerant: Special Education supports and services provided by special education personnel for 20% or less of the school day.
- ☐ Supplemental: Special Education supports and services provided by special education personnel for more than 20% of the day but less than 80% of the school day.
- ☐ Full-Time: Special Education supports and services provided by special education personnel for 80% or more of the school day.

Location of child's program:

- ☐ Child's neighborhood school
- ☐ Another public school building in the family's school district
- ☐ A public school building in another school district
- ☐ Intermediate Unit Building classroom
- ☐ Approved Private School (Name: \_\_\_\_\_)
- ☐ Other Private Facility (Name: \_\_\_\_\_)

- ☐ Hospital/Homebound  
☐ Charter School (Name: \_\_\_\_\_)

**School District Data:**

School District \_\_\_\_\_  
 Agency Locale \_\_\_\_\_  
 Total Students \_\_\_\_\_  
 IEP Students \_\_\_\_\_  
 Total SD Revenue \_\_\_\_\_

1. When did your child receive a diagnosis of ASD?
2. How would you describe your child?
3. When did your child begin to receive intervention services?
4. Describe the services your child received when he/she entered the school system?
5. Tell me about school?
6. What related services does your child receive?

**II. Perception of parents of students with ASD towards family/school partnerships.**

7. How would you describe your interactions with your child's teacher? Prompt for examples.
8. How would you describe your interactions with your child's principal? Prompt for examples.
9. How would you describe your interactions with your school district's Director of Special Education? Prompt.
10. How would you describe the interactions at IEP meetings for your child? Prompt.

**III. Ways in which parents of students classified with ASD describe the motivators/barriers for their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals.**

10. Tell me why you have interactions with your child's school.
11. Tell me about the communication between you and the school.
12. Do you feel you are part of a team with the educational professionals? Why or why not?
13. Tell me what you want most from teachers.

**IV. How parents of students classified with ASD describe their relationships that arise out of their participation (collaborating) with educational professionals.**

14. Describe your relationship with your child's teacher.
15. Describe your relationship with the school's administration.
16. Do you trust educational professionals? Describe that trust or lack of trust?
17. How did the last school year go for your child?

**V. The roles parents believe they hold in the educational live of their children with ASD.**

18. What are your educational concerns for your child?



19. What do you do before IEP meetings?
20. How do you monitor the educational professionals working with your child?
21. How do you monitor the education your child receives?
22. Tell me how you negotiate at IEP meetings.
23. What are your concerns for your child's future?

**VI. What can be learned from the parents that may translate into effective policy and practice for family/school partnerships?**

24. Where do you find support?
25. If you were in charge of special education, what changes would you make?
26. What do you want special educators to know?

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